A Doorway
in Blake Street

By

Tom Balch

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Dedicated to:

JM and PM

This book is also dedicated to all people living rough on the streets. No matter the village, no matter the town, no matter the city, and no matter the country…

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A Doorway in Blake Street

Chapter One

'The meeting'

I could feel that the walk home was easing the strain of a day best forgotten and clearing my mind with every step. I was pleased with my decision not to take the bus. The town was still busy with the after-work rush, so I decided to take the back streets and avoid all the chaos.

As I entered Blake Street the noise and bustle of the main shopping area disappeared and there was a calmness rarely seen or felt from a bus or a car. The buildings, although in a state of disrepair, had so much character I found myself walking slowly, taking in and appreciating the scene.

I could see him in the distance lying in one of the doorways. As I got nearer, I noticed that he was spreading out flattened cardboard boxes on the floor to keep out the cold.

He was an old man. How old was hard to tell due to the mass of his grey hair and grey beard. His weathered and deep wrinkled skin showed the signs of a hard life spent on the streets.

In a rasping voice he called out to me, "Hey Mister! Can yer spare a pound?"

I looked over to him and saw that he had quite a cheeky smile and a likable manner about him. "And what would you do with a pound, that is if I were to give you a pound?" I said.

"Well sir, I would probable buy meself somfin to keep out the cold. You have to admit it is cold, sir, and it gets a lot colder come the nights. These doorways don´t got central heating yer know."

I smiled and said, "And would that something be something that comes in a bottle?"
He chuckled a while and said, "You reads me well, sir, you reads me well."

I moved towards the doorway pointed to the step and said, "May I?"

"Please do young sir, take a pew."

I sat down on the step beside him and spent a few moments taking in the scene. "Tell me, what´s your name?" I asked.

He turned towards me and with a twinkle in his eye he said proudly, "I am Donald James Kilbaine, and who might you be, young sir?"

"My name is Jim, Jim Fraser, pleased to meet you Donald," I said. "And I am pleased to meet you, young Jim," he said offering his hand.

We shook hands and I asked him how a man so 'Dignified' was living on the streets.

"Well, a while back, a lot of years in fact, I lost my wife and kids. Then I lost my job, couldn't cope yer see, so I just walked away from it all and, well, here I am today". He sat up, opened the top buttons of his old army greatcoat, reached inside and took out a piece of old cloth. He placed it on his lap and slowly started to unfold it revealing two photographs. He offered me the first of the photos saying that it was a photo of his Mum and Dad. "Taken in Portsmouth it was. You can see I takes after my Dad," pointing to his roman nose as he starts laughing. "Been down to see the Victory that day we had; Nelson's ship, yer know. Went down to Portsmouth a lot we did in them days; Dad loved it there." He paused for a few moments thinking to himself and then said, "Yeah! Loved it a lot he did."

"Well, he looks to be a very tall and proud man, Donald, was he a military man?" I asked.

"Yeah, in the Navy he was, thirty-five years man and boy. S´pose that´s why he loved Pompey so much".

"What are their names, your mum and dad?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "my dad's name was Earnest, Ern they called him, on the mine sweepers he was during the war, had quite a few medals he did, don´t know what happened to em, probable got lost somewhere, who knows.

When he left the Navy, he got a job selling insurance, you know, door to door collecting the money each week. He didn´t enjoy it much but he used to say at least it puts bread on the table." He went quiet for a while and then said, "Here, I´m not boring you am I?"

"No, not at all, Donald," I said, "I find it really fascinating, and your Mother, what was her name?"

"Well, my Mums name was Margaret, Maggie they called her, her friends, that is. Everyone liked her, do anything for anyone she would. Always had people commin round to see her." He looked up and said proudly, "Very popular she was my mum, yep! Very popular indeed. She was the head cook in one of those department store canteens, used to do dinners and that for the shoppers, s´pose they still do that these days, the big stores I mean."

"Yes," I said, "The big stores do. Well, I must say Donald, your mum and dad look to be a really happy couple indeed."

His face seemed to light up and he said. "Yeah! They was. Mind you they´re long gone now they are, yeah, long gone. Dunno what yer got till it´s gone, you remember that young Jim. Dunno what yer got till it´s gone."

Donald took back the photograph and then handed me the other one saying, "Now this is, was my wife and kids. Died in a fire they did, broke me it did, broke me bad. That´s what put me on the skids, young Jim." Not wanting to dwell on it he took the photograph back and carefully wrapped both of them up in the cloth. Before putting them back into his pocket he kissed the parcel twice and said, "D´yer know what young Jim, give me right arm for a fag I would, you aint got any smokes on yer, have yer, could murder a fag right now I could."

"Sorry, No," I said, "I don´t smoke I´m afraid. But here let me give you some money to buy some". I took out my wallet with the intention of giving him a fiver.

As I opened the wallet Donald saw the photograph on the inside, leant across and said, "Who are they, your family is it, wife and kids".

"Yes," I said, "This is my wife, Jane and my two children, Samantha and James. Samantha is ten and James is seven."

Donald put his hand on my arm and said in a solemn voice, "That sends shivers, Jim, my two were ten and seven when they was taken."

We both sat silent for a few moments and then I asked him how on earth do you get through something like that.

Slowly shaking his head he said, "You don´t young Jim, it just rips yer soul from yer body. You just walks about numb and, well, miles from anywhere and anything really, like in a dream."

Neither of us spoke for a while, both silent and looking down at the ground. Then we both started to speak at the same time. "Sorry, no, you first," I said.

"What were you going to say?" "Well," Donald said, "I was going to say forget about that pound young Jim. Come back tomorrow and we can carry on with our talk. Best talk I´ve had in a long time was that, really enjoyed it, I did."

"I really enjoyed our chat too, Donald," I told him. "But I won´t be able to make it tomorrow, I´ll be away in London with work. I will, though, come and see you again when I´m

back, and then we can carry on where we left off. By the way, what is the 'Tipple' you like to keep the cold at bay, that is. A drop of Whiskey, I suppose",

Donald looked shocked and said, "Whiskey! No, I likes a drop of rum I do, and when I says drop, I means lots of drops." He then went into a fit of wheezy laughter and coughing. "And it´s good for me cough, too," he said, and then we both laughed, this time without the coughing.

"Okay, Donald, rum it is, and what cigarettes do you like?" I asked him.

"Any will do me, sir. Mind you I do prefer Senior Service but these days I can´t be too fussy yer know."

"I shall bring you some next time I come, Donald," I told him. I then stood up and brushed off the back of my trousers with my hands. "Well, Donald I must be making tracks. As I said earlier, I can´t make it tomorrow but I will see you again soon. You take care my friend and look after yourself."
I gave him a five-pound note and said, "Here, Donald take this and get something you need."

Donald took the note thankfully and said, "Ah! Bless you young, sir, bless you".

I then set off in the direction of home. At the end of Blake Street, I turned and looked back. Donald was arranging his plastic carrier bags and appeared to be mumbling to himself. In the doorway, Donald was making his bed up for the night using his bags as a pillow. He then started to sum up things

by talking out loud to his belongings, “He seemed a nice bloke, yeah, a nice bloke indeed. Was nice to have a good chat, really nice. Ah! Well, the Sally Army will be here soon with some tea, just hope it don´t rain again tonight. I´ll give it another five minutes and then make my way round to their van.”

-: T :-

Chapter Two

‘General James and his Army’

As I walked home, the cold air came in with the darkness and I couldn´t help but think about the years of lonely cold nights which was Donald´s way of life. I thought too of what his life would or could have been if he had not lost his family, and it was at this point that I decided to do all that I could do to help this old man get by.

I reached home at eight o’clock and as always announced my arrival by calling out, “I´m Home.”

Jane called out from the lounge, “I´m in here, Jim.”

I went through to the lounge. Jane was at her computer desk. “How was your day?” I asked her.

“Oh, you know, same old same old,” She said, “nothing special, I met Brad Pitt for lunch, and we talked about running off into the sunset together, you know how it is. Oh! I did manage to get those old clothes boxed up for the charity shop though; you can take them in when you have time this week.”

“Well, that leads me in perfectly,” I said.

“How do you mean, leads you in perfectly?”

“Well, as I walked home tonight, in one of the doorways in Blake Street…”

Jane interrupted me saying, “Don´t tell me, you met

up with Angelina Jolie."

"No don´t be silly, listen," I said. "There was an old tramp sat on flattened cardboard boxes in one of the doorways and he called out to me asking if I could spare a pound."

"A pound," Jane said turning around from her computer desk, "it seems that everything is going up in price these days."

"Yes," I said, "that´s what I thought and when I asked him what he would do with the pound he mentioned something to keep out the cold, which is a drop of Rum as it turns out."

Jane pulled a face saying, "Why the cheeky so and so."

"Cheeky maybe," I said, "but we had a really nice long chat, and it turns out that he´s been through a really rough old time.

He lost his family in a fire, wife, son and daughter, all gone at the same time."

Jane put her hands to her face gasping and said, "Oh! How dreadful, Jim. It doesn´t bear thinking about; How old is he?"

"Not sure," I said, "though I´d guess he´s about... well, it´s hard to tell really, seventy or eighty. His hair and beard are grey and living rough can add a few years to the appearance I suppose. The funny thing is, after our chat he told me to forget the pound and come back so we can continue our conversation. He is obviously lonely, and the company must be worth far more to him than the money."

"Even so, Jim," Jane said, "you should have given him something, poor man."
"I did," I told her, "I gave him a fiver to get some cigarettes, actually."

Jane smiled and said, "That was good of you, I think I´d have done the same. How long has he been on the streets, did he say?"

"He didn´t say, no. He had a real friendly way about him though, you know. It must be hard for him out on the streets at his age. What I think I´ll do is take him that heavy sailing fleece of mine. That should keep him warm, Oh! And the thermal gloves and scarf".

Jane then asked me when I was planning to see him again, reminding me that I was in London tomorrow.

"Yes, I know," I said, "I told him not tomorrow and that I would visit him again soon."

"Jim Fraser," Jane said, "you are a very kind and caring man."

"I know," I told her, "that´s why you married me."

"Not at all," she said laughing and rubbing her hands like Scrooge, "It was for your money."

"And here´s me thinking it was for my looks," I said. We both laughed; something Donald and his wife hadn´t done for all those lost years, I thought.

After the London trip work got really heavy and the week just flew by without my even noticing. I felt really guilty for not being able to visit him. But at last, here we are getting

things ready to go and see him, albeit a week later than planned.

"It´s not your fault, Jim," Jane said. "I´m sure Donald will understand, so don´t go worrying unnecessarily." She then started to check through what we had for him, holding up each item and naming it before packing it away. "Sailing fleece, thermal gloves, scarf, two pairs of thick woollen socks, twenty senior service, half a bottle of 'Keep out the cold' Navy Rum and three handkerchiefs. He´ll think all of his birthdays have come at once bless him." She had the biggest of smiles on her face, one of those proud of yourself smiles for being a nice person.

"It was a good idea to put it all in that old backpack of yours," I said, "it will be of more use to him than those plastic carrier bags he´s been lugging around."

"Oh!" Jane said, remembering, "I´ve put one of those plastic raincoats and some matches in the side pocket, I´m sure they´ll come in handy for him."

"Right, I´m off then, I´ll call you when I´m on my way home later tonight."

Jane saw me off at the door telling me to give her regards to Donald.

"Will do," I said, and then I made my way on foot down to the old town. It was a clear dry evening, not a cloud in the sky, and there was a chill in the air. The fleece will certainly be appreciated I thought as I turned into Blake Street.

I walked slowly checking all the doorways but could not see Donald in any of them. My heart was sinking fast as I

made a second sweep of the road but there was no sign of him anywhere.

After fifteen minutes I left Blake Street and started to search the surrounding area. I saw a group of street people sitting by the bins at the rear of the supermarket and asked if any of them knew Donald and, if so, where I could find him. The response was one of not wanting to get involved with me as they all denied knowing him or of his whereabouts. After about three hours of searching the roads and doorways in that part of town I ended up back in Blake Street and sat down on the step in Donald's doorway.

I phoned Jane letting her know that I couldn´t find him and that I would be making my way home. The cold air was now starting to bite and as I turned up my collar I couldn´t help but wonder where he might be or if something had happened to him.

My mind on the walk home went into overdrive considering all possibilities and his voice asking me to come back tomorrow to continue our chat echoed loud inside my head.

By the time I reached my front door I was feeling quite low and convinced that something must have happened to him.

As I walked through to the lounge Jane was saying how sorry she was and that she could not believe it

when I had called. “Did no one know where he was?” she asked.

“No,” I said, “everyone I asked either didn´t want to know or did not know. I must have been up and down twenty streets looking for him”. I slumped down on the settee and plonked the backpack down next to me. Lowering my head into my hands with elbows on my knees, I asked out loud, “Where can he be?”

Jane answered saying, “We´ll get a good night’s sleep, it´s Saturday tomorrow you´ve got all day. I´ll come with you and we´ll find him I´m sure.”

“Yes, you´re right,” I said, “but I just keep thinking that something may have happened to him.”

“Jim, he´s been living on the streets for years, it´s his life, I´m sure he´s fine now stop worrying,” Jane said.

After a good night’s sleep, we sat having breakfast and Samantha and James listened to the story of Donald with keen interest and insisted that they come with us to help find my new lost friend. After breakfast we all dressed up warm and set off on our mission.

Young James wanted to lead the way and was striding out like a General leading his army.

“Slow down, James,” Jane said, “We´ve got all day, you´ll tire yourself out at this rate.”

“Come on,” we don´t want to miss him, do we?” he said, still excitedly leading his army.

We all just looked at each other and smiled.

Samantha said, "Boys will be boys Mum," I thought to myself that she´s starting to sound just like her mother.

Our plan was to start at Blake Street and work our way outwards, asking anyone we meet on the way if they know of Donald or where he might be. After a few hours of checking and ticking off the names of the streets we saw a council road sweeping vehicle.

I stopped the driver and asked him if he had seen Donald. He hadn´t but said a lot of street people sometimes stay on the waste ground down by the canal. You may find him down there, he told us and wished us luck.

We made our way down Hooks Lane, which leads to the canal and the waste ground that the driver had told us about. There were three men gathered around an old oil drum in which they had a fire going, rubbing their hands over the flames to keep warm. Donald was not one of them and they all seemed reluctant to talk to us.

Time was now getting on, so we headed over to the main part of town to get lunch. The children were becoming dejected and bemoaning the fact that they were starving. At the café, we ordered bacon sandwiches and tea and not a word was spoken as we all tucked in with mms and ahs. It was as though we had not eaten for days. When finished, we wiped greasy lips and planned out our next course of action.

We searched for another hour and then made our way home. We arrived home at seven-thirty. It was dark, and the cold night air was beginning to take its toll on us. The kids headed straight for the sofa and the

TV. Jane went into the kitchen to heat up the soup that we prepared earlier, and I buttered the rolls ready for our well-earned supper.

Although we had not found Donald, we all agreed that we had had a really wonderful day out together. “Chin up, Jim,” Jane said, “there´ll be other days. You´ll find him I´m sure”.

-: T :-

Chapter Three

'The Scarlet Pimpernel'

I went out one or two evenings each week and most weekends looking for Donald but all to no avail. Six weeks had passed. It was a Wednesday night and I´d been out for two hours when I found myself back in Blake Street. I sat down in the doorway where I had first met Donald. I was feeling low and just stared at the ground when suddenly a voice called out, "Hey, mister can yer spare a pound?"

I stayed face down and, to myself, I smiled the biggest of smiles.

Donald sat down next to me and said, "We´ve come a fair few miles my friend, it´s good to see you again."

"And it´s good to see you, Donald," I said. "I´ve been trying to find you for weeks. You´re more elusive than the scarlet pimpernel, my friend."

"Ha-ha," he said. "Well, you´ve found me now, young Jim, we can carry on with our chat."

"So, where have you been?" I asked him.

"Just been about," he said, "nowhere in particular, just here and there, doing me rounds."

"You were telling me about your mum and dad last time, Donald, where did you live?"

"Well," he said, he coughed to clear his throat. "We was living in a place called Bedhampton, it was a small village, and it was about ten miles or so from the city of Portsmouth. Great for me as a boy it was, plenty of fields and that. I had loads of those books yer know, birds, bird eggs, trees, wildflowers, you name it, I had em all. Kids in them days used to collect birds' eggs yer know, you had to get a rose thorn and make a small hole in the eggs, top and bottom and then you had to blow through the top hole and all the insides came out the bottom. In my room I had a drawer and in the bottom I had a layer of sand and all my eggs was laid in there with the name of the bird on a piece of card under each egg. But you can´t do that now, young Jim, it´s illegal now to take birds eggs, it wasn´t when I was a boy though."

"How many eggs did you have?" I asked.

"Well, I must have had a lot cos it was a big drawer, and it was full, must have been at least fifty. Beautiful they was, all different colours and sizes they was. It wasn´t till I got older that I wondered about that." Donald went quiet for a while and then said, "Well, what we was doing to the birds, cruel it was I s´pose when you looks back, but we all done it in them days."

"Times have certainly changed Donald," I said.

"Yep! You can say that again, young Jim. Here, tell you another thing, when we was kids we all had bikes, I made my bike myself I did. I found an old frame in the river took

it home and cleaned it up and built it with bits I scrounged or found. When it was finished I painted it blue, well I say blue, it was two different blues, dark and light blue, 'Two Toned Blue Donald' my dad called me, ha-ha. Served me well it did, that bike. Us kids, we used to ride our bikes down to the creek in the summer and go for a swim, we all took sandwiches with us and we´d stay there all day, great fun it was".

"It sounds as though you had a great time as a lad, Donald," I said.

"Well, we knew no fear in them days," he said, "not like it is today. D'ya know what, hardly saw a car in them days yer know; nowadays they´re everywhere, scared to cross the road I am." He went quiet for a while and seemed to be thinking of those days so long ago.

"Now, before I forget Donald, I´ve brought a few things for you."

"That´s very kind of you, young Jim," he said.

I passed the backpack to him and told him what we had packed inside. As I explained to him about Jane's involvement as to what we should pack, I noticed his eyes started to moisten. He sniffed loudly and said, "No one has ever been this kind to me before, young Jim. I don´t know what to say."

"You don´t have to say anything, Donald, it´s a pleasure for us to help you."

I then told him how Jane and the kids helped me look for him at the weekends, and he started to sob. “Hey, come on,” I said, “No need for that.”

He sniffed and wiped his nose and then said that he would love to meet my family and have the chance to thank them for their kindness.

“You certainly will, Donald,” I said. “I shall bring them down with me at the weekend to meet you. They will be so pleased that I have finally met up with you again.”

I stayed for about an hour and we chatted more. We made plans for me to come again on Saturday with my family. He seemed delighted with that and told me that he couldn´t wait. My journey home that night was a happy one.

-: T :-

Chapter Four

'Two-hundred and Twenty-seven'

The following Saturday morning we were all up early and getting ready for our big day. James and Samantha were really buzzing with excitement and Jane had taken control of proceedings. She had made two large flasks of hot chicken soup and buttered bread rolls; Her intention was for us as a family to have and share lunch with our newfound friend. What a lovely idea we all agreed as we readied ourselves for our day out with Donald.

The morning air was cold, but the sun was shining and our walk down to Blake Street was a happy one. As we entered Blake Street, we could see Donald in the doorway of one of the derelict buildings. He was sorting out his backpack and belongings.

"Good morning Donald," I called out.

He looked up, smiled, and said, "And a very good morning to you too, young Jim." He stood up and said, "This must be your family."

"It is Donald," I said introducing them to him in turn. Jane told him that we had brought soup and buttered rolls with us for lunch and that we would love for him to join us.

That would be a real pleasure he said and cleared his things away to make space for us all to sit. He then said

thank you to Jane for the backpack and the warm clothes that we had given him.

"It is our pleasure," Jane told him. "Jim has been telling us all about your chats and your life as a youngster. Things were certainly different in your days."

"They was indeed," said Donald.

"Did you really get your bike from the river?" asked James.

"I did," said Donald. My mum and dad didn't have much money in those days cos it was just after the war, you see. It was only the frame I got from the river, the rest came from friends' old bikes and bits I found."

"I got my new bike for Christmas," said, James.

"You, young man are a very lucky lad indeed," Donald told him. "And what about you Samantha, did you get your bike from the river."

"No, said Samantha," as she started giggling at the thought of it, "I got mine for my birthday."
"Well, if you ask me," said Donald, "I think you are two very lucky young people indeed."

Jane said it was time for some lunch and started to hand out big mugs of the chicken soup she had made along with the buttered bread rolls.

We all tucked in saying how delicious it was, and Donald said it tasted divine. "Well thank you kind sir." said Jane.

As we ate, there were smiles and nods of appreciation along with copious amounts of mms and ahs.

After the soup and rolls, Jane washed out the mugs and packed them away and then poured tea from another flask into paper cups and passed them round.

"How old are you?" Samantha asked Donald.

"Don´t be so rude," said Jane.

"It´s okay," Donald said and told Samantha he was two hundred and twenty-seven.

Samantha and James went into fits of laughter.

"Oh no you're not," said James, "no one is two hundred…"

"And twenty-seven," said Donald.

"Your funny," said Samantha still giggling away.

"Did you have any brothers and sisters?" asked, James.

"No I didn´t," said Donald. "I had a lot of friends though, when I was your age."

"Now it´s my turn," said Donald, "What subjects do you both like at school?"

"I like English and writing," Samantha said. "I like writing stories and my journal."

"Wow, you have a journal do you?"

"Yes, she said, it´s like a diary but I do it on my tablet and include photos." She took her tablet from her backpack, turned it on and said she would like to take a photo for today's entry.

Looking a bit baffled Donald said that it would be fine, but she was to make sure she got his good side.

Samantha started to giggle again and said he was as bad as Dad.

We all laughed, and then Samantha told us all to get closer and say cheese as she took the photo. When the photo was taken, she showed Donald and said she would be writing an account of the day to go with it when they get home.

"Well, I would love to see what you have written," said Donald, "when you come to visit again."

Samantha said she would bring it with her next time.

"And what about you, young James? What do you like best at school?"

"I like sports," he said, "I play football for the school and I am the captain."

"What´s your favourite team then?" asked Donald.

Samantha, Jane, James, and I all said at the same time, "The Arsenal."

"Ha-ha," Donald said, "I take it that it´s a family thing."

"Sure is," I said, "we are all Arsenal mad in our house".

"Who do you support, Donald?" asked James.

"I don´t support any team really," he said, "but if anyone asked me from now on I´ll say, Arsenal."

"You´ll do for me," said James.

Jane poured out another cup of tea for the grownups and gave Samantha and James a carton of juice each. She then gave everyone a Bakewell tart that we did not know she had. "Surprise," she said, "I thought it would be a nice treat."

"Ha-ha, I´ve not have such a lovely meal in years," said Donald. "Thank you all so very much."

"You're welcome," said Jane, "and we will do this more often. That I can promise you. I´ve brought you some more things to keep you going."

"That´s very kind of you young, Jane."

"It´s the least we can do for you, Donald. Now I´ve made up a little first aid kit for you. There are some plasters, hand cleansing gel, paracetamol tablets, tea tree oil, you can put that on cuts and sores, it´s an antiseptic. We have also got you some more 'Keep out the cold' Navy Rum and some cigs."

"Ha-ha, that´ll keep me going alright," said Donald, "thank you."

"Jim was saying that he thought you could do with some new trainers. The ones you have seem to be falling to pieces. What size are you?"

"I am a size nine and a half, but when I put on the thick socks you gave me they do pinch a bit."

"Then we shall get you a size ten. That will give you enough room," said Jane.

"This really is kind of you all. I don´t know what to say, really."

"As we said before Donald, you don´t have to say anything," Jane said.

"Donald, what do you normally do for food when we aren't here?" asked James.

"Well, the Sally bash, that´s 'The Salvation Army' they come round the town at nights and give out tea and soup to a lot of the people living on the streets, and there are others

who help with the odd bit of clothing. Sometimes people give us some loose change, but most people ignore us or move to the other side of the road when they pass us, can´t blame em, I s´pose.

There is one bloke I´ve seen who sits and begs in Douglas Road every day, and at six-ish he goes off to the car park, gets in his flash car and drives off, then he´s here the next day. So, there are some who aren´t really homeless. I s´pose that´s why some people are a bit wary".

"What did you do for work before being homeless?" asked Samantha.

"Well, I used to work in the Co-op dairy. I was in charge of the bottle washing plant. In those days, Sam, can I call you Sam?"

"Yes, of course you can. All my friends call me Sam."

"Well in those days the milk was delivered to everyone's houses in glass bottles and the empty bottles were returned to us by the milkmen and we washed and sterilised them ready to be filled again and delivered the next day. Of course nowadays it´s all in cartons or plastic bottles that just get thrown away."

"We do all our recycling at home."

"That´s a good thing, that is, Sam. In my days as a lad there was no plastic bags, mothers used to take a shopping bag with them to get the stuff in, there was no giant supermarkets in them days, yer know, used to go down to the local shops we did. We even got lemonade in glass

bottles, everything from sweets to meat and fish, it was all wrapped in paper it was. No plastic pollution in them days."

As I listened, I felt very proud of how James and Samantha were talking to Donald as if he were a family friend they had known all their lives. The more Donald talked of his younger days, the more his character came out and the more likable he became.

Time was getting on and I said that it was time for us to make a move. "Well, it has been a really wonderful day," said Donald, "it was like a world champion chatting competition. I don´t think I´ve had such a good chat for years. Really enjoyed it I have, and the soup and rolls were lovely."

"I´ve got some rolls here with cheese in for you to have later, Donald, and a flask of tea. Maybe the Sally bash can refill it with tea for you when they come at night"

"That is a good idea," said Donald, "I am sure they would do that for me."

Everyone said their goodbyes and we made our way home. I told Donald that I would be down next weekend and that he should take care.

-: T :-

Chapter Five

'Trainers for New Feet'

We arrived home just after seven and all of us agreed that it was a really wonderful day. Samantha was eager to write up her journal and James plonked himself down in front of the telly. Jane and I put all the mugs and spoons into the dishwasher and got dinner on the go. During our meal of sausages, mash, peas and gravy, Samantha said she was interested in doing a project for school on the days when recycling was really for real. She said she would discuss it further with Donald next time she goes down.

James thought that Donald was funny when he said he was two hundred and twenty-seven years old and that he liked talking to him a lot.

The following morning the kids went off to school and I went off to work. When Jane finished clearing away the breakfast things, she readied herself to go downtown to see about trainers for Donald.

She took the bus and sat chatting to a friend of hers she met at the bus stop. Jane told her about Donald and how we were helping him. Her friend did not seem too keen on the idea and thought that the tramp was taking advantage. Jane explained about Donald losing his family in a fire and of the lonely life he has led since, and that seemed to change her

friend's opinion on the matter. She said she felt awful for being too quick to judge and that she was proud of Jane and her family for what they are doing for Donald.

Jane said, "It makes you wonder about all of the homeless people living rough on the streets. I´m sure more could be done to help them."

"Well," said Helen, her friend, "I know there are charities that help them, the Salvation Army for one."

"Yes, I know that" said Jane, "but I meant officially, not just by some charity. There are thousands of illegals coming into the country every year and they are put up in hotels and we give them money from the day they get here. I just think that we, as a country, could do more to help our own people in need. I´m not saying don´t help people from other countries, I´m saying we should look after our own as well."

The bus arrived at the town square and Jane said bye to her friend. As Jane looked back she noticed Helen putting some money into a cup that a homeless man was holding out and she smiled to herself wondering if Helen would have ignored the man if they hadn´t had their chat about Donald.

Jane got to the sports shop and was absolutely amazed at the selection of trainers on offer. "Can I help you?" asked a young girl assistant. "Yes please," said Jane, "I´m looking for size ten that are warm and slightly higher on the ankle, for a man."

The young girl said that they had quite a few of that type to choose from and asked what sort of money Jane was looking to spend.

"What do they range from?" Jane asked.

"Anything from forty to a hundred and ninety," the girl said.

"Let's go somewhere in the middle," Jane said. Jane told the girl that they were for a homeless man and would prefer a dark colour.

The young girl, Amelia according to her name badge, found a black pair that looked absolutely perfect and Jane said she would take them. The girl said that they are sixty-four ninety-nine, but the manager said he would reduce them to fifty pounds because they are to help someone in need. Jane was shocked by this kindness and thanked the girl and the manager.

At school, Samantha told her teacher, Miss Dridge, all about Donald and the project she wanted to do, and Miss Dridge thought that it was a wonderful idea and that it should involve the whole class. The plan was to look firstly at how things were made and sold before plastic, and compare their findings to today's ways. Every member of the class was to write a list of items that should be considered in the project.

Samantha showed Miss Dridge her photo of Donald and explained what he had told her about milk and lemonade being in glass bottles that were reused time and time again, and when broken could still be recycled at the glass works.

All of Sam's friends were excited to be involved and loved the way Sam and her family were helping the old man. Miss Dridge assigned tasks to all of the pupils. Each of them had to look at certain items that are today made in plastic and compare them with times gone by.

Samantha was really on a high when she got home and couldn´t wait to tell her mother all about it.

"You will have to speak to Nan and Granddad," Jane said, "better still, I shall speak to Steven. He runs the old folks home in West Leigh, he might let you go to the home and chat with the residents about the old days. You will have to prepare a list of questions you would like to ask them though."

"I will start writing them out tonight mum," said Samantha.

I got home just after eight. It had been one of those days that was more frustrating than it was productive, and all I wanted to do was sit down, put on my slippers, and put my feet up. "I´m home," I announced as I came in and was met by a very excited Samantha speaking at ten to the dozen about her project at school and maybe going to the old folk's home, as mum suggested.

"Now that," I said, "is a brilliant idea, they will know all about shopping in those days and I´m sure they would enjoy helping out with your project, too."

Samantha went off to her room to write up her notes for the project and also the questions she will ask the old folk at the home.

Jane brought in a cup of tea as I sat back on the sofa, and told me that she had got some trainers for Donald. She explained that the manager had reduced them because they were for a homeless person.

"Wow," I said, "how nice was that."

"Yes, I was really surprised when the young assistant told me." Jane took the trainers out of the box and asked, "What do you think?"

"They are perfect," I said, "should have got me some as well," I joked.

"How was your day?" Jane asked.

"Not easy at all," I said, "a day best forgotten. It will all be okay come tomorrow though. So, what´s for dinner?"

"Well, I´ve got a casserole in the oven and I thought we could have that with some veg. Is that okay?"

"That sounds lovely, I´ll go and clean up".

Donald was making his way down to the junction of Hooks Lane and Stockheath Way where there is a shelter that helps the homeless. They have a soup kitchen, and sometimes give out coats and jumpers, but Donald´s visit this evening was to see the nurse that worked there. He was having problems with his feet. He had blisters and ingrowing toenails, and they were causing him a lot of pain. He was hoping that they could help him.

The nurse took Donald into one of the back rooms and filled a bowl with warm soapy water. She told Donald to

remove his shoes and socks and put his feet into the water to soak for a while.

"Ah! That´s nice," said Donald, "me feet have not felt this good for a long time," he told the nurse.

"When I´ve finished with them you will feel like a new man, Donald," she told him.

After a few minutes she washed Donald´s feet and changed the water. This time she put some Dettol in to the water and made it slightly warmer. "You just sit there, and I will be back in about ten minutes," she said, "then I will see to the blisters and the ingrowing nails."

"Thank you," said Donald, "You are very kind."

"That´s what we are here for Donald. I´ll bring you a nice cup of tea when I come back"

"And a few biscuits," said Donald with a big smile and that twinkle in his eyes.

"And a few biscuits," said the nurse, laughing at Donald´s cheek.

When the nurse returned with Donald´s tea and biscuits he told her all about Jim and his family and how they were helping him out. He said that they were going to bring him some new trainers and that he didn´t want them to see the state of his feet.

She said that he should call in once a month and they will give him a good pedicure, "and before you asked," she said, "it would include tea and biscuits."

Donald went into a fit of wheezy laughter and said, "You knows me well, young lady, you knows me well."

"Whilst you are here, Donald," she said, "I will listen to your chest if that´s okay with you, you sound a bit raspy."

"I don´t want to put you to any trouble, I don´t," said Donald, "sides I´ll have to be off soon, yer know."

"It´s no trouble at all, Donald. You may need some antibiotics and the doctor here can prescribe some for you." Having listened to Donald's chest the nurse got the doctor to come through and examine him.

The doctor told Donald that he had bronchitis. It wasn´t that bad but he would give him some antibiotics and check him again when he comes in for his pedicure next month.

Donald thanked the doctor and promised he would take the tablets.

The nurse dried his feet and treated the blisters. They were only small, but she agreed with Donald that they can be quite painful. She then cut and trimmed his toenails and cut out the ingrowing ones. When she had finished, she rubbed cream into Donald's feet. It was a cooling minty smelling cream, and Donald asked if he had died and gone to heaven. The nurse laughed and gave Donald a clean pair of socks to put on and a can of powder for him to use daily.

Donald went through to the main hall and had a bowl of stew and two bread rolls. After he had eaten, he left the shelter and made his way to Blake Street to settle down for the night. The people at the shelter said he could stay there for the night, but he told them that

he would rather not, but thanked them for the offer. In his doorway, Donald was sorting out his things ready for the night and was telling his belongings that his feet felt absolutely marvellous, “They was nice people in the shelter,” he told them, “really nice people they was. They even gave me a bottle of water to take me tablet with tomorrow.” He laughed to himself, thinking about Sam´s recycling and told his belongings that people didn´t buy water in my day. They drank tap water and there was no plastic bottle to get rid of when you’ve had a drink.

The night air was getting colder and Donald put on the big sailing fleece that Jim had given him and felt much warmer as he settled down for the night.

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Chapter Six

‘Leather Studs and Scrumping’

I finished work at six and walked home by way of the back streets. As I entered Blake Street, I saw Donald in his doorway. The doorway had three steps and about four feet of covered area before the boarded-up door, perfect for keeping out the wind and the rain.

The buildings were run down Edwardian terrace houses that were due to be pulled down, but long delays through planning had caused a stalemate between the developers and the council.

“Good evening, Donald,” I called out, and his reply was buoyant and happy.

“And a very good evening to you too, young Jim,” he said, almost singing.

“You´re happy tonight, Donald. Have you won the lottery or something?”

“No, but I feel great cos the nurse at the soup kitchen saw to my feet last night and they feel so much better now, they do, so much better”.

“I´ve brought you some new trainers to go with your new feet, Donald. Jane got them yesterday, I hope they are okay.”

Donald laughed at the ‘new feet’ bit and said that they certainly do feel like new. “They said they would do me feet

every month if I calls in, and the doc there gave me some antibiotics, he did, for me chest. Said it was a bit of bronchitis I got. So that´ll be better soon too."

"That´s fantastic news, Donald. You really do have to take care of yourself now that winter is knocking at the door."

"They were really nice people, young Jim. I seems to be meeting a lot of kind people these days, what with you and your family and the nurse."

I gave the box to Donald and he thanked me and told me to thank Jane for him.

"Oh boy," he said when he saw them, "These are absolutely blooming marvellous, can I put them on now?"

"Of course you can Donald, that´s what they are for. Jane put a new pair of warm socks in the box for you too."

Donald removed his old trainers and socks and took out the powder the nurse had given him. He powdered his feet, put on the new socks and the trainers, and said that they fit perfectly. "My feet," he said, "feel like, well, they feel like what they should do."

"How do the trainers feel?" I asked him.

Donald stood up and moved around, went down the steps and walked along the pavement and back. "Feels like I´m walking on air, young Jim, walking on air."

"That´s great. Jane will be over the moon," I said.

We both sat down, me on the step and Donald by the boarded door.

"Know what, young Jim," said Donald, "I can remember the day my mum and dad brought me my first pair of football boots, I can. They was brown leather and there was a paper bag with leather studs in as spares. The studs in them days come with nails already in em, and when they needed changing you had to hammer them into the sole of the boot, but my dad would do that for me though."

"That´s one for Samantha's project," I said. "Nowadays the football boots are all moulded plastic."

"Tell yer what, young Jim, when yer got a kick in the shins with those old boots you knew it. I remember young Trevor Huntley when he took a good kicking. We was playing another school from the area and they was a lot bigger than us. Broke his leg it did. You could hear the crack all over the pitch. He went all white and his leg went off at a right angle below the knee, made yer feel sick inside to look at it, it did. Can´t remember what happened to Trevor cos we all went off to Secondary Modern School after that. Think he went to the Grammar school, he was quite brainy, he was. Ha-ha! Happy days they was, happy days. I remember that every time we played a match, when I got home, I had to clean me boots off and brush in what they called 'Dubbin.' It was like a greasy clear polish type stuff, it was, but it kept the boots in good order and stopped the leather from drying out and cracking, and the laces, they was leather too, young Jim, they was leather, too. The teacher who ran our team used to make us rub liniment on our legs before we went out to play, stank it did, and it made yer eyes water too, but yer

legs were warm. Red and green squares our shirts were, with white collars and our shorts was white, and socks were red. Things yer remember, young Jim, things yer remember. Not boring you am I, if I am you need to tell me to shut up."

"Not at all Donald, it´s great hearing about how things were for you when you were a lad and I really do find it fascinating. I know for sure that Jane and the kids love hearing about your life."

"Oh! Said Donald, I must ask you not to bring me any cigs cos I don´t smoke anymore, they was making me chest and cough worse so I´ve stopped it with them, I have."

"That is good news indeed, Donald. Does that go for the Rum as well?"

"Don't be so daft, young Jim," said Donald laughing, "that´s my central heating that is, ha-ha".

It really was good to sit and chat and laugh with Donald. The more we chatted the more his wonderful character shone through. "So, you say you were living in Bedhampton?"

"Yes," said Donald, "we moved there from Portsmouth when I was about eight, I think. Loved it there I did, loved it. Our house was opposite a massive sports field, loads of football and rugby pitches for the winter and cricket in the summer months and at the other end was the school I went to. A primary school it was. It was a lot different from living in the city. When we lived in Portsmouth, 'just off Queen Street', we used to play on the bomb sites, there was no fields there yer know. I remember some days the Royal

Marine Band would march along Queen Street playing, and all us kids would march alongside them, swinging our arms like we was in the Army, it was great fun for a kid. And another thing, we used to go round collecting empty Lemonade bottles to take back to the shops cos we got money back on them in those days yer know, tuppence or thruppence a bottle, can´t remember how much exactly but it was a lot for us kids in those days yer know."

I told Donald that Samantha's project is being done by her whole class and that he was the inspiration for it. "So, you had better get your thinking cap on, because she said she will be chatting about times when you were a lad when she sees you next," I told him.

"I will look forward to that tell her. My thinking cap will be well and truly on, ha-ha."

"The more we chat young Jim, the more I remember, it all comes flooding back into my mind, it does. Things that I thought were long forgotten come back clear as a bell, they do. Funny how the mind works. Here, when we was kids, we used to get an old wooden crate, apple crate or something like that and a long plank of wood. Four old pram wheels and make ourselves go-carts, and we would race them all round the roads. We would find a road that was a hill and race down it, cor, they really went fast they did. We used to have so much fun making things to play with… wooden swords, catapults, bows and arrows, go-carts, see-saws, swings, you name it we made it. Always out doing things we was."

"It sounds like a wonderful childhood you all had in those days, Donald."

"Endless fun it was, young Jim, yep, endless fun. Families didn´t have much money yer see, no money for toys, only for food. We all had clothes that were hand-me-downs and that´s the way it was. Not like today, Jim, kids have got everything they want nowadays. Shame really, they are missing out on so much. Mind you, young Jim, we wasn´t all little angels yer know, we used to go scrumping apples from the big houses." Donald started to laugh and said, "One day I got caught and all me mates ran off. The man what owned the orchard took me by the scruff of the neck and into the house where he said he would call for the police and that I would go to prison. I was so scared I started to cry, thinking I´d be locked up yer see, but his wife she said they wouldn´t call the police if I promises not to raid their apples again. Well, of course I crosses my heart and hopes to die, don´t I, and they sent me off home. When I gets to the gate they call me back and the lady, she was nice she was, she says that I can take a few apples home for my mum. Thank you so much, says I and off I goes with a bag of apples, ha-ha my mates couldn´t believe it, they couldn´t. Never went back there again." Donald's face was lit up like a Christmas tree remembering all those things from his childhood, it was a pleasure to sit and listen to him.

"Sorry Donald, but time is getting on and I´ll have to make tracks," I said, "It really has been lovely talking to you about the old times."

“Thank Jane for the trainers,” he said as I was getting up, “and tell young Sam I will get me thinking cap on, ha-ha.”

“You take care Donald, and we will all see you next Sunday.”

“We will have lunch again, and lots of chats,” said Donald.

“Yep! Lots of chats,” I said. At the end of Blake Street, I turned around as I always do, and Donald was chatting away to his belongings. I smiled to myself, rounded the corner, and made my way home.

In the doorway, Donald was asking his belongings if they like his new trainers and telling them how comfy and warm they were. “It´s going to be a cold night, but my feet will be lovely and warm,” he said. “That´s it, Observers book of Bird Eggs, that´s what it was called, ha-ha, Observers Books, had loads of em I did. Must remember to tell young Jim when I sees him, been trying to remember what they was called, ha-ha. Oh! and the other one was the ‘I Spy’ books. Right, head down, get some kip and I´ll see yer in the morning.”

-: T :-

Chapter Seven

‘Extreme Weather Sleeping’

When I woke up there was a bit of a chill in the air. I looked through the curtains, and everywhere was covered in thick frost and although it looked like a winter wonderland outside, I knew that it would have been unbearable for Donald.

These long cold nights will take their toll on a man of his age. I knew that Donald had turned down offers to stay at the shelter on many an occasion and that he would prefer to be on his own outside.

“What´s the weather doing?” Jane asked as she stirred in bed.

“Everything is covered in frost and it looks like it will stay that way for quite some time,” I said. “grey cloudy sky and no sun. I should have put the car in the garage last night, it´s going to take ages to defrost it.”

“I wonder how Donald got on last night,” she said.

“I was thinking that myself,” I told her. “I think I shall get him an outdoor sleeping bag. That old Army greatcoat won´t keep him warm during the nights. I will get one today when I finish work and if you make up a couple of flasks, tea and soup maybe, we can go down and see him tonight, make sure he´s okay.”

"I shall make up some sandwiches for him as well," said Jane. "While you're getting the sleeping bag, you can look for one of those fleece balaclavas, I think that is a must for him in this weather."

"Will do," I said.

"I´ll go and put the kettle on and get breakfast on the go."

"Toast and marmalade for me," said Jane, "and coffee".

"Yep, I´ll have the same."

"Cereal and juice for the kids. I´ll come and do their pack lunches in a mo," said Jane as she finally forced herself out of a nice warm bed.

Samantha and James were excited about everything outside being white and were asking if it will snow today.

"No, it won´t snow today," I told them, and their faces showed their disappointment as they took their places at the table.

"I wanted to take my sledge out," James said.

"Well, you´ll have to wait quite a while for it to snow," I told him. "Now eat your breakfast and then get ready for school, the pair of you, or there will be no Wi-Fi when you get home tonight."

Jane looked across and smiled nodding at the kids eating and finishing their breakfast as if their lives depended on it. I laughed and the kids joined in knowing that I didn´t mean it, and that there would be 'yip pee' Wi-Fi' tonight.

I finished work early and made my way into town to the outdoor shop. They sell everything for camping and outdoor pursuits, so I was in the right place for a good quality

sleeping bag. I found one that was for extreme weather and was wide enough to make it easy for getting in and out of. I asked the assistant if it was waterproof and was told that it was only shower proof. He told me that the survival bags were and that the sleeping bag could go inside to keep it from getting wet.

I got the survival bag and the sleeping bag, and also a nice thick fleece balaclava, left the store and made my way home.

Jane and the kids were ready and waiting when I arrived home. I grabbed myself a quick cup of coffee and a sandwich before we got in the car and made our way down to see Donald.

Donald was sat in his doorway with his back against the boarded door keeping himself out of the wind. He looked tired and drained, but cheered up when he saw us.

"Good evening to you all," he said as we approached.

"Good evening Donald," we replied in unison.

"How are you my friend?" I asked. "I guess you were cold last night in the frost."

"I was indeed," said Donald, "bitter cold it was, bitter cold."

"You are going to be a lot warmer from now on," said Jane, "we´ve got you a nice warm sleeping bag and fleece balaclava to keep out the cold."

"I dunno what I´ve done to deserve that," he said, "you people are really kind."

"Donald, you have become a dear friend to us all and we will make sure you do not suffer any more than you need to."

"Now," Jane said, "how about soup and some sandwiches?"

"Cor, that sounds lovely," he said, "and that´ll warm me up nicely from inside to out. My head was warm last night Sam, cos I´ve had my thinking cap on for a week waiting for all your questions. How is your project going at school?"

Samantha said that she wanted to ask about things in his day like the milk bottles being used over and over again.

"That´s easy," said Donald, "one of the things I recall is that when my two was babies there was no such thing as disposable nappies. We used to use towelling ones that were wrapped around the baby and secured with large pins. When they was needing to be changed, the babies that is, the nappies were washed and boiled up clean, dried and used again. They never got thrown away like the ones today, and the ones today block up all the sewers they do, read that in the papers I did."

Samantha was typing this into her tablet as Donald was talking and stopped to ask how the nappies were wrapped around the baby.

"Ha-ha," said Donald, "well, the towelling nappy was square in shape and you had to fold it corner to opposite corner so that it formed a triangle. Then you would put it on the floor, or table point downwards and lay the baby on to it. You would then bring the point up between the baby's legs

and the sides were brought to the front and the three ends were pinned together. Didn´t you do that when you played with your dollies?" asked Donald.

"No, they were just like the nappies are today".

"Can´t we talk about boy´s things?" interrupted James, pulling faces.

"We certainly can," said Donald. "Your shoes, young James, what are they made of?"

"Don´t know," James said.

"Well, they are made of synthetic materials, they are. Now in my day as a kid, my shoes were leather, and when they wore out they would be sent to the cobbler and he would put on a new sole and heel, so the shoes would go on and on. Not thrown away on the tip never to rot away. The thing is, young James, all these things made with plastic, they never rot away, here forever is plastic. Now, when we went to the beach as kids, we had buckets and spades the same as you do, but our buckets were made from tin and the spades were tin with wooden handles, all of which eventually rots away. The metal parts sometimes went to the scrap man. You got money for scrap metal in those days, yer did. The metal would be sent by the scrap man to get melted down and used again, yer see. Every bit of plastic that was ever made is still here today, and more and more things are being made with it. One day I s´pose they will come up with some way to reuse it or dispose of it."

Jane passed the flasks and sandwiches to Donald and I gave him the sleeping bag and balaclava. If it rains, I told

him, slip it into the survival bag, it´s waterproof and will keep you dry.

"How are you doing for clean socks?" asked Jane.

"I´ve got a pair left but the others are dirty," he said.

"Put them in this bag and I´ll get them washed for you. Are you still using the powder the nurse gave you?"

"I am," said Donald, "and I´ve been taking me tablet too. I must be honest, my chest is feeling a lot better and that awful cough has gone too. And my feet, well, they feels like new they do."

"That is good to know Donald, we are so pleased to hear that you are feeling better."

"Oh! Young Jim," Donald said, "those books I had as a kid was 'Observers Books' they was, and I also had the 'I Spy' ones as well. I remembered what they were called last night, I did."

"I had those as well," I said, "and I´m sure you can still get them these days."

"Dad said that you used to make your own toys," said James, "swords, and catapults, bows and arrows."

"I did young James, and we used to have as much fun making them as we did playing with them, and we was always outside playing, never sat indoors. In fact, when I was your age, seven, we never had a television, we had a gramophone that played records and a wireless, but no television, not till I was about ten or eleven. And another thing young James, we never had a phone in the house, my

mum and dad had to go down to the corner of our street to the phone box if they needed to make a call."

Samantha and James couldn´t believe that there was no phone in his house. "Everyone has phones nowadays," said Samantha, "mobile phones."

"No such thing in my day, anyway I don´t know what you all have to talk about, I don´t," Donald said. "Yer know what, it´s been really lovely seeing you all tonight, I didn´t expect to see you all for another week. Thank you so much for coming and bringing me the sleeping bag and balaclava." He pulled the balaclava on and asked, "Well how do I look?"

"You look great," we all said. "Tell yer a secret," said Donald, "I don´t really care what I looks like as long as it keeps me warm, ha-ha."

"It will certainly do that." said Jane. "I´ll get your socks cleaned and dried and Jim will bring them down for you tomorrow night, that way you won´t run out before we see you next week."

We said our goodbyes and made our way home in the knowledge that Donald would stay warm and dry in the coming weeks. As I looked back at the end of Blake Street, Donald was laying out his sleeping bag and, as always, he was chatting away to his belongings.

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Chapter Eight

‘Memories of Christmas’

Over the next few weeks our chats with Donald became more detailed. I think that was because he knew we would be coming to see him again. All the things he spoke of were not so rushed or jumbled and he was really starting to open up.

I remember one evening we talked about Christmas not being too far off and he told me how much he missed the celebrations with his family.

“On Christmas morning, we would all get up early,” he said, “cos the kids would be calling out to us, ‘has he been yet,’ ha-ha, we would look at the clock, see it was only half five or six and shout back, ‘No, he´s not been yet, go back to sleep.’ We knew they was excited so we would get up anyway and let them come down. I can still see the excitement on their little faces. Shaking they was, as they opened all their presents”. His eyes welled up as he recalled the memories. “I´ve not talked like this, ever, he said. Not to no one, I haven’t,”. He dried his eyes and carried on. “About a week before Christmas we would put up the decorations and the tree. My wife and the kids would dress the tree. I would be passing the baubles and things to them and they would attach them to the tree. Take us a whole day to get it

all done, it would, but it was worth it cos it always looked lovely when we had finished. The kids excitement grew more as each day passed and Christmas got nearer, same for kids today I s'pose." After a short pause, Donald continued, "We told the kids that the presents in the morning was from Santa and in the evening after tea we had our family presents, ones we give each other like. Each of us, the kids as well, we bought a present for the other three. That´s what we used to do as a family, it was. During the day, the kids would be playing with their presents and Jane and I would be sorting out the Christmas dinner. There would be loads of laughter and fun going on. We loved Christmas time, we did, loved it. In the afternoons we would all sit and watch a film on the telly. We had tins of Quality Street, chocolates, crisps, oh! loads and loads of stuff, you name it we had it. Dates, fruit, loads of stuff we had. ha-ha! Always put on a few pounds over Christmas I did. And nuts, we had nuts." Another pause as Donald reflected on those happy times. "We always got the kids a board game and on the Christmas evening we would all sit at the table and play. It was chaos at times but so much fun. When Tina, Tina was my wife's name, made the Christmas pudding she always put a sixpence in the mixture, and we would all have to stir it because she said it was lucky to do so. She said her grandmother and her mother always done that. Whoever got the sixpence at dinner time could choose what film we would watch in the afternoon. If Donald James got, it we would watch 'The Great Escape' or something like that and

if Jane got it, it would be 'The Sound of Music'. Jane was our first born and Donald James was the youngest. Two kids we had."

Donald stopped talking for a while to wipe away tears and I must admit I was welling up too, just listening to him. How absolutely devastating it must be to lose your family the way he did, I thought to myself.

"When we had our Christmas dinner we would all link up, holding the crackers, and pull them at the same time, ha-ha, everything from the crackers flew all over the table and we would read out all the jokes and put on the hats. The kids would have the gifts from the crackers piled up by their plates and we would have Christmas songs playing, but not too loud, in the background, like, yer know. I would slice the Turkey and Ham. We would each have a slice of Turkey and a slice of ham and then help ourselves to the vegetables and gravy and stuffing, ha-ha! I can taste it all now I can, taste it all now," said Donald.

"Me too Donald, you are making my mouth water," I said.

"When my Tina went out to get the pudding, we would turn off the lights and close the curtains and she would bring it in on a big plate, on fire it would be. We would all cheer and clap, it was one of the highlights of the day it was. One Christmas we got Donald James a Chemistry set, he really loved that, said he was going to be a scientist he did. What surprised me was that he actually done all the things properly according to the instructions. It wasn´t just a five-

minute wonder thing, he showed a real interest in it he did." more tears, and time out. "Sorry about this," said Donald. "It just hurts so much to talk about it."

"That´s understandable Donald," I told him. I poured some coffee from the flask I had brought down, and we sat silent for a while sipping our drinks.

"We were having a wonderful life, we was. Why it had to end I´ll never know. The vicar was giving it all that rubbish about God's will, and his mysterious ways. Told him to get off the B & B, I did. He wasn´t too pleased. All you lot do is take, I told him. You never give. When did you ever open the doors of your thousands of churches to those who´ve fallen on hard times and living on the streets? I´ll tell yer when, I said, never, that´s when. You preach about love for your fellow man but there are thousands living rough on the streets and you do nothing. I suggested he go home and look at himself in the mirror if he wants to see what a hypocrite looks like. All those people starving in the world and you lot sit with millions of properties asking for money to repair your bleeding roofs, make me sick the lot of yer. The church wouldn´t have given me any trainers or a sleeping bag. D´yer know what young Jim, the vicar down the road here called the police the other day to remove a homeless man sleeping in the church yard cos he would upset the so-called churchgoers. You know, those religious people that… I´m going to shut up now," Donald said. "I´m sorry. I was going on a bit, young Jim. Don´t take any notice of me, I´m just being a silly old fool, that´s all."

"You don´t have to apologise to me Donald, I fully understand. We finished our coffee and then Donald said that he needed to go for a walk on his own to do some thinking if that was okay with me.

"No problem at all," I told him. "You just take care, and I will see you at the weekend." I gave him my mobile number and told him to get someone to call me if he was in any difficulty. He said I was not to worry and that he would be fine. He thanked me for the coffee and said to give his regards to Jane and the children. I watched him shuffle off down to the end of the street and as he turned into the next road, he looked back at me and waved.

I headed off home not really knowing what to think and although Donald said he would be okay, I was quite worried about him and the mood he was in.

When I got home, I explained it all to Jane and she seemed to think that him talking about his family could actually be like a healing process. He has been keeping all this to himself for all these years, she said, and now he is talking about it freely. That can only be a good thing.

"Could be," I said, "anyway, he has my mobile number if there is a problem, so that gives me some peace of mind". Later that evening Donald arrived at the shelter and asked to speak to the nurse but was told that she was not on duty tonight. She will be here tomorrow night he was told.

"Can we help you with anything?" he was asked by the shelter's manager, Mr. Graham Peters, who also asked if he would like a meal.

“A meal would be wonderful,” said Donald, “I will see the nurse tomorrow, if I may.”

“Yes, that will be fine,” said the manager. “We are all here to help you, whenever you need it, you only have to ask”.

Donald sat with a few others at one of the tables and enjoyed a meal of stew, mashed potatoes and gravy. Having eaten, he asked for his flask to be filled with tea which they did, and then he made his way back to Blake Street, having again turned down the offer to stay for the night. “I just likes to be alone with me thoughts,” he´d always say.

In his doorway, Donald laid out his sleeping bag and readied himself for the night. He poured himself a cup of tea, took out his photographs, kissed them twice and said goodnight.

“Looks like it´s going to be another cold one tonight,” he told his belongings, “but I shall be nice and warm in me new sleeping bag and trainers.” He poured a little drop of the rum into his tea to keep out the cold, and raised his cup saying cheers to Jim and Jane for their kindness. He said sorry to Jim for walking off, and then told his belongings what a good man Jim was.

-: T :-

Chapter Nine

'The Assault'

The following afternoon Donald made his way to the shelter to see the nurse and get his feet checked. She asked how he had been, and he told her that he felt so much better now that his cough had gone and that he had stopped the smoking.

"Donald," she said, "I am so proud of you, well done."

When the nurse had finished treating his feet, the doctor came through and listened to his chest. He was pleased with the improvement and that the antibiotics had done their job. The manager of the shelter said that Donald could have a shower whilst he was here and that he could provide him with new underwear. Donald said that would be nice and took him up on the offer. Having had a shower and change of underwear and socks, the manager suggested a haircut and beard trim.

"Cor, it must be my birthday or something," said Donald.

The guy who does the hair cutting works for the salon in the town. He comes in once a month and gives his time free for the homeless. Whilst he was cutting Donald's hair, he was chatting away to him about how he liked to do something to help people who are not so well off and this seemed to be a great way to help them.

When he was finished Donald said that he looked and felt like a new man. "Thank you so very much, young man," he said. "You are welcome," said the hairdresser, "I´m only too pleased to help."

He had not felt this good in a very long time. Shower, shave, clean underwear and socks and they changed his old army greatcoat for a modern Gore-Tex jacket. The manager said that it will keep out the cold and that it was also waterproof. It wasn´t a new jacket but it had been cleaned and was still in good condition. The manager said he would have Donald´s greatcoat cleaned professionally and that he could pick it up in about ten days or so.

"That´s very kind of you," said Donald.

Donald left the shelter and couldn´t help but look in all the shop windows at his reflection as he made his way down to Blake Street. "Ha-ha!" he thought to himself, "now I knows what a million dollars looks like."

Later that evening, Donald was settling down for the night when he heard a lot of shouting and swearing coming from the bottom end of the street. It was four lads about nineteen or twenty years of age, carrying cans of beer and staggering all over the road.

As they got level with Donald, one of them screamed out, "What the bleeding hell have we got here lads?" and he started pouring beer all over Donald. Donald tried to shield himself and avoid getting soaked but to no avail as the other three joined in soaking him and his possessions. One of the four started to kick Donald and the others threw his

belongings all over the pavement and then they joined in with the kicking and the beating. This attack went on for what seemed ages. Donald could not see, as his eyes were swollen, his face was bleeding, and his sides were hurting. Eventually he blacked out.

One of the four had recorded it all on his mobile and when Donald stopped moving, they all gave themselves high fives and were screaming about the 'rush' it gave them. They left Donald lying on the pavement and then carried on their way as though nothing had happened.

Quite a while later, Donald started to come to. The pain in his chest and side was making it difficult to breath and his face was badly swollen. His lips were split and some of his teeth had been knocked out or loosened in the attack. Slowly, and with a lot of pain, he managed to get himself up and collect all his belongings that were strewn all over the pavement and road.

He sat in the doorway trying to get his breathing steady and noticed that his sleeping bag was soaking wet and stinking of beer. He decided that he must somehow get to the shelter and get his belongings dried out.

Every step he took sent shockwaves of pain through his whole body, but he was determined to get there out of the cold. He knew that if he stayed out, he would not see it through the night.

When he eventually got to the shelter, they helped him get inside and sat down. The night manager phoned for an ambulance and his staff started to dry out Donald's belongings. They bathed his cuts and washed most of the blood from Donald´s face whilst waiting for the ambulance crew to turn up. When they arrived, the paramedics went into overdrive checking Donald´s heart and blood pressure. They dressed his cuts in the ambulance as they travelled to the hospital. They suspected that Donald had a few broken ribs, and also a broken jaw and cheek bone on his left side.

When they arrived at the hospital, Donald was wheeled into one of the cubicles where nurses treated his wounds. He asked one of the nurses if she could call my number and let me know what has happened to him. I arrived at the hospital at midnight and was told that Donald was in surgery undergoing an operation to repair his jaw which had been broken in the attack. He had also suffered two cracked ribs, a torn retina and broken wrist. I was assured by the staff nurse that Donald would make a complete recovery, but it could take time.

I phoned Jane and updated her on Donald's situation. I told her that I would stay here until he is out of surgery and I had the chance to see him.

She said she would ring work for me in the morning and let them know that I wouldn´t be in today.

"I think that´s best," I said, and would ring her later when I know more.

While I was at the hospital, I called the shelter and spoke to the manager and informed him of Donald´s situation. He said he would get Donald´s belongings cleaned and sorted and keep them safe for his return. I thanked him and told him I would call again when I knew more.

There is only so much machine coffee you can drink, and the choice of crisps, dried sandwiches or a choc bar was not really helping. I did what we all do in these situations, pacing the corridors, watching the door waiting for someone to come and give me some news. The clock on the wall was hardly moving, and the four hours I had to wait seemed to drag on forever.

"He´s out of surgery and all went well," said the staff nurse as she came over to me. "You won´t be able to see him just yet, but I will let you through in about an hour and a half."

"Thank you," I said, "I´ll be right here," I called Jane and told her the news.

"Thank God he´s okay," she said, "give him our love when you see him."

"Will do," I said. When I finished the call, I noticed that two police officers had arrived and were talking to the nurse at the reception desk. She was pointing them in my direction, and they made their way over.

"Good evening Mr…". "Fraser," I said, "Jim Fraser. I´m a friend of Donald's. He is a homeless man that my family

and I are helping. His full name is Donald James Kilbaine," I told them.

"We are here to investigate an alleged assault," said one of the officers.

"Well, I think he´s had his jaw wired up so he won´t be talking too much," I said. "I hope you catch the people that did this to him. Apparently, they filmed it, according to the manager of the shelter, so no doubt it´s already been posted online."

"We shall look at everything," the officer said.

As I was talking to the officers, two young men arrived at the desk. One of them had his right hand in bandages and was asking for someone to look at it as he thought it was broken. He was taken into one of the cubicles, and his friend seemed edgy having noticed the two police officers. I watched him as he turned away from us and he kept rubbing his knuckles. I quietly said to the police officers that it may be a good idea to start their investigations with those two.

As the officers went over to talk to the young man, he made a dash for the door and the officers gave chase. I watched through the window and they caught up with him in the car park. After a few moments, he was placed into the back of the squad car. One of the officers came back and told me it was them. He went through to the cubicles, and I assumed he put the other lad under arrest. At least he suffered some pain as well as Donald, I thought to myself.

The police officer came through and informed me that the lad with the broken hand was involved and had given him

the names and addresses of the other two, he then went outside and radioed in.

After about twenty minutes, another squad car arrived and took the first lad away. The nurse came through and informed the officers that they could go through and speak briefly with Donald but were not to stay too long.

I phoned Jane and told her all that had happened, and she was so pleased that they had caught the thugs who carried out this vile attack on Donald.

When I eventually got in to see Donald, I could hardly recognise him. Not because of his new haircut, but because they had to shave his face before they saw to his jaw. His face was badly bruised and swollen. How could anyone do something like this to an old defenceless man, I thought. When he saw me, he sort of smiled and raised his hand as if saying, "Hi." His other arm was in plaster and suspended in a sling attached to the top of bed.

"How are you feeling, Donald?" I asked, knowing what a stupid question it was. He gave me a thumbs up with his good hand. I sat down next to the bed and told him that all his belongings are safe in the shelter and that Jane sends her love and good wishes. The nurse came in and said that Donald needs to rest. She said I can come back later today during visiting hours. I said goodbye to Donald and thanked the nurse for all she was doing for him.

I went down to the shelter and spoke to the manager. He said that when Donald is released from hospital he could stay at the shelter as long as he wants.

That would be great, I said, but I know for a fact that he would rather be on his own. "Let´s wait and see how he feels when they discharge him," I said.

The manager agreed and said how chuffed Donald was when he left earlier having had a shower, beard trim, and haircut, "He looked quite dapper, he did."

"Oh! He had his beard trimmed as well… they shaved his beard off completely at the hospital," I told him. "He had to have stitches on his face, and they operated on his jaw."

"How the hell people can set on an old man the way they did is just beyond me," he said.

"Let´s hope they get all they deserve," I said. "Four of them there were twenty-year olds. Beggars belief it does."

I took all of Donald's belongings home with me so that we could get them cleaned or replaced where necessary. We just wanted to make sure that when he was back on his feet, he would have all he needs, and all of it in good order.

Jane and the kids were really upset and couldn´t believe that there were people like that in the world, especially so close to home.

I told them that the nurse said he will recover in time and be back to normal soon.

Jane said it was a shame that something like this happens just as he was starting to open up about his family. I hope he comes through it unscarred mentally. We shall all visit him when he feels a bit better, maybe in two or three-days' time.

"We could sneak him in some rum," said James, "That´ll cheer him up."

"That´s a great idea," said Jane, "but I can´t see the hospital allowing us to do that somehow."

"I shall take my tablet in so he can see how my project is coming on," said Samantha.

"He´d like that a lot," I said, "but we must not tire him out."

Visiting time was between six and eight in the evenings and I arrived at six fifteen. Donald was sat up in bed and looking a lot more comfortable than he did earlier. Talking between clenched teeth he said, "Hey buddy, can yer spare a pound?"

I laughed out loud at that and said, "You are not allowed rum in here." I also told him what James said earlier. "He´s a good boy that James," he grunted, "a good boy indeed."

"Well Donald," I said, "bruises aside you actually look a lot younger with your short hair and clean-shaven face. The manager at the shelter sends his regards and hopes that you get well soon. I shall be bringing Jane and the kids to see you in a few days' time. Samantha said she will show you how her project is coming on.

"That will be nice tell her," he said.

I could see that he was feeling the pain of his ribs as he tried to speak, so I told him that I would go now and let him rest.

He said he was sorry he walked off the other day when we spoke about his family, and afterwards he actually felt a lot better in himself than he had done for many years.

I told him what Jane had said about that possibly being like a healing process.

"You tell her she was right about that young Jim."

"I will Donald," I said and got up to leave.

As I got to the door I looked back and waved goodbye.

Donald waved his good hand and said, "Thank you for everything, young Jim, thank you for everything."

-: T :-

Chapter Ten

'Sippy Beakers'

The following morning Jane laundered all of Donald´s clothes, and said that she would buy a leather bifold display wallet to put his two photographs in.

"You can take it in for him tonight. I think he would love to have them with him," she said.

"Yes, that´s a lovely idea," I told her, "what´s his sleeping bag like?" I asked.

"I will send it to the dry cleaners," she said, "it absolutely stinks of stale beer. His fleece and jumpers, and the rest of his clothes I can wash here so they will be okay. The shirt and jumper he was wearing are covered in blood. I´m not sure if it will come out, I´ll see how it goes."

"Just get him a couple of those warm country cotton shirts," I told her, "I want to sort him out for the winter months ahead the best we can. Anything that´s frayed or worn get rid of and we´ll replace it with new."

The doctor arrived on his morning rounds and asked Donald how he was feeling.

"A bit sore I am, sir, a bit sore," said Donald.

The doctor said they will change his pain management to something a little stronger to help him cope.

"That´s very kind of you sir," he said.

"Well, all the x-rays look better than we originally thought. Your two ribs are cracked, not broken, and you have bad bruising on your side. Your wrist has been reset and will be perfect in about six weeks. Your jaw was fractured and is now immobilised, so it should heal okay. The ophthalmologist will be in later to check your eye so we´ll keep the patch on until he sees you. Is there anything you would like to ask Mr. Kilbaine?"

"Yes," said Donald, "how long do you think I will be in here for?"

"Well, we will take it one step at a time. Let´s see how the healing goes before we talk about you leaving here, shall we?"

"S´pose so," said Donald, "you knows best sir, you knows best."

The doctor replaced Donald´s chart and said he would see him again tomorrow.

When the doctor had left, the nurse told Donald that he would be drinking his tea from a sippy beaker and also soup later today.

"Ha-ha," said Donald, "how do you get my biscuits through the sippy beaker?"

"You will not be having biscuits for quite a while Mr. Kilbaine," said the nurse.

"You nurses are s´pose to be angels I thought," he said with a very painful laugh.

"Mr. Kilbaine…"

"Please call me Donald," he said.

"Donald," said the nurse, "I see we are going to be having a lot of fun while you are with us."

"No point in being miserable, is there?" he said.

She smiled and told Donald if there is anything he needs, he is to press the call button.

"What if I needs a drop of rum, do I press the button then?"

She laughed and said she would be back later.

The two police officers that were dealing with Donald´s case arrived to speak to him about the four attackers. They will be charged with assault and causing grievous bodily harm. They have all given statements and admitted they attacked you. The footage on the lad's phone can also be used as evidence, and on viewing it I can only say that it really was a horrific assault. "I think they will be in for a custodial sentence," said the officer. "The photographs of your injuries will also be used in court. Is there anything you would like to ask us or add to your statement?" they asked Donald.

"No, I think you have it all covered," he said. "Thank you both very much for your help."

The other officer said that Donald could claim for any damages to his belongings or cost incurred for repairing or cleaning.

Donald said he would have to speak to young Jim about that.

The officer left a card with Donald, telling him that he could contact him should he need to.

After they left, Donald started to think about how, for all these years he did not meet anyone that showed kindness to him, and now it just seemed that a new chapter in his life was being written. He also decided that when he saw young Jim, he would ask him to tell the police that he did not want to press charges against the four lads. "Can´t see the sense in ruining their lives as well," he told the items on his side cabinet. "They were drunk after all," he said, "If they was sober I s´pose I´d think a bit differently about it."

The nurse came in and changed the drip bags and told Donald that soup was on its way.

"What kind of soup is it?" asked Donald.

"It´s really special, Donald, just for you it is, it´s rum and biscuit soup. I asked the kitchen for it especially for you."

"LOOK!" said Donald, "a big pig just flew over your head and I think I noticed that your nose just got a little bit longer."

The nurse laughed and told Donald that her name is Judy and how nice it is to know such a delightful man as him.

"Nurse Judy it is then," said Donald.

"The doctor has increased your medication slightly, Donald, so it should help you cope better with the pain."

"Thank you very much nurse Judy," he said, "that´s very kind of you all."

"That´s what we are here for Donald." As she said that, the kitchen staff arrived with Donald's soup, and nurse Judy adjusted Donald´s bed into the sit up position to make it easier for him to drink.

"Hello Mr. Kilbaine," said the lady with the trolly.

"Please call me Donald," he said.

"Okay, Donald," she said. "I´ve got you a beaker of soup and a beaker of tea, and three beakers of water to keep you going. I´ll come back later for the empty beakers."

"Thank you," said Donald, "thank you very much." Donald finished his soup and laid back. It wasn´t too long before he fell into a deep sleep.

Donald woke up about three hours later and had a drink of his water, "Hi, nurse Judy," he said as the nurse came in,

"You´ve got a visitor," she said.

"Hello Mr. Kilbaine, I´m Doctor Susan Jarvis," She said, "and I´m here to have a look at that eye of yours."

"Feel free, Ma´am" Donald said.

After the examination, the doctor told Donald that it was good news. There was no retina damage, his eye was just blood shot and should clear in a few days. "I´ll give you a full eye examination in two days' time when you are more settled. Till then keep the patch on and the nurse will give you the eye drops I have prescribed."

"Thank you very much doctor," said Donald.

"Don´t mention it," said the doctor, "now get some rest. I´ll see you in a couple of days."

"How are you feeling, Donald?" I asked as I entered his room.

"I am being well looked after," he said, "the doctors and nurse Judy are really kind."

"Oh! Jane asked me to give you this," I passed him the leather wallet Jane had put his photos in and he was over the moon with it.

"Young Jim, you make sure you thanks her for me when you gets home, it really is a lovely thing to do."
"I will," I said.

"Something I needs to tell you, young Jim. I have decided not to press charges against those four lads what set about me the other night. I think it could ruin their lives and I don´t want that on my conscience. I´d rather it was all just forgotten about."

Well, that´s entirely up to you Donald, but what if they go on to do it again and someone else gets hurt?

Donald looked up at me and said that if they go to prison, they could turn out even worse. By not charging them they will have a better chance in life.

We both sat silent for a few moments and then I told Donald that he is a good man and that I fully understand why he has made this choice. "You just want them to have the life that you couldn´t have, am I right?" I asked him.

"Something like that young Jim, something like that."

I told him that we have all of his belongings, and that Jane has laundering everything. "We will have to get you some new shirts and a warm jumper because yours were too badly stained with blood. The sleeping bag is being dry cleaned and everything will be ready for you when you come out of hospital."

“You are both so kind,” said Donald, “thank you. The nurse was saying that they took out two of my teeth when they done my jaw, one was broken and the other one was loose.”

“It could have been so much worse,” I said.

“That it could,” he said, “but I´m going to be okay, I´m just a bit sore here and there that´s all, so best just get on with getting well again. Oh! The eye doctor said my retina is okay and the eye is just a bit blood shot, he´s going to check my eyes out in a couple of days, he is.”

“That´s good news,” I said, “Good news indeed”.

Donald gave me the card the police officer gave him and asked me to inform them of his decision not to press charges.

“Of course I will,” I told him, “I´ll inform them first thing.”

-: T :-

Chapter Eleven

'The fastest wheelchair'

"Okay, are we ready?" I asked.

The kids and Jane all said yes in unison.

"Right, let´s go then," I said, and off we went to visit Donald.

"Now! remember," Jane said to the kids, "no noise and we mustn´t tire him out, he´s still very weak."

"Will I be able to show him my project?" asked Samantha.

"Yes, of course you can, Donald said he was looking forward to seeing it."

When we got up to the ward, Donald was sat up in bed and was looking so much better. The bruising was starting to fade, and he seemed more alert. His arm was out of the sling and he waved as we entered.

"Hello Donald," Jane said, followed by Samantha and James.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"All the better for seeing you. This is nurse Judy, she is looking after me," he said.

We said Hi to the nurse and she said that she would leave us to chat with Donald.

"You look so much different with your haircut and shave," said James.

"And is that 'different' better or worse?" asked Donald through his clenched teeth.

"I don´t know, you look younger and, well, just different."

"You look better," said Samantha, "but you still have bruises on your face. Do they hurt?" she asked.

"No, not now they don´t, they are nearly gone now anyway," said Donald. Donald said thank you to Jane for the photo holder and said it makes the photos more special.

"I have brought my tablet so you can see how my project is coming on," said Samantha. She turned it on and showed Donald the picture she had taken of him and the write up she had started, it was titled 'Recycling-Then and Now'.

Donald laughed at the photo and said, "It is amazing that you can see a photo these days the moment it´s taken. In my day we had to send the film off to get developed and wait a week for the photographs to come back." After reading Sam´s write up, he told her that he was really impressed and that he was proud to be friends with a budding journalist.

Samantha laughed and told him it´s just a school thing.

“Maybe,” said Donald, “but remember young lady, from little acorns.”

“What do you mean, acorns?” asked Samantha.

“Well from little acorns we get giant oak trees, so from just a school thing, we can get a world-famous writer. The acorn has to grow into a tree, so you have to grow your writing skills, it all takes time, but it will be worth it in the long run,” Donald explained to Sam.

Sam did what she always does when she is being praised for something. She just giggled and said thank you.

Jane told Donald that all of his clothes were cleaned and ready for him and that they were with the nurses at the nurse’s station for whenever he needs them.

“That´s very kind of you, Jane,” he said.

“I have spoken to the Police as you asked, and they have dropped the charges,” I told Donald.

He said he was grateful to me for doing that.

“Have you heard any more about when you will be allowed out?” I asked.

“They say it could be another week or so, they want to see how my jaw heals. They say the ribs and the wrist are going to be fine, so it´s a wait and see thing at the moment.”

“Oh! Before I forget, the manager of the Shelter said your army great coat is back and looks as good as new. He even found some replacement buttons for it and his wife has sewn them on for you.”

“Oh, that is good news,” said Donald, “I loves that old coat I do, loves it.”

“And what have you been up to young, James?” asked Donald.

James lit up at being included and told Donald that they had a football match at school yesterday and that he had scored two goals. “We beat them four nil,” he said with the biggest of smiles on his face.

“Well done you,” Donald said, “I am proud of you young James, remember those little acorns, train hard and you will be playing for ‘The Arsenal’ one day.”

“That would be fantastic,” said James and I pointed out that if that was to happen the family would be able to get free tickets.

“Ha-ha, Happy days.”

Nurse Judy came in and said that it was time for Donald to go down to see the consultant about his retina and that we will have to say our goodbyes.

We told Donald that we would see him again soon and if there was anything he needed, he could get the nurse to call us. “And, before you ask, no! We won´t be bringing any rum,” I told him.

“Ha-ha,” Said Donald, “You knows me well, sir, you knows me well.”

We all said goodbye and made our way to the door.

Nurse Judy said that he will be fine and thanked us for coming to see him.

On the way home, Jane said it was such a relief to see him so well and that he looked so much younger sporting his shorter hair and shaven face.

"He loved the leather bi-fold photo wallet," I told her, "he´ll be able to stand it up on his bedside cabinet."

Donald was taken down in a wheelchair to the ophthalmology department and he thought it was great to be out of bed. The young male nurse taking him down was a very cheerful and chatty lad. He introduced himself as Richard, the fastest wheelchair pusher that this hospital has ever seen, "But don´t tell Staff nurse that," he told Donald. Needless to say, Donald and Richard will get on great.

Richard took Donald the long way down to the eye department giving him a guided tour of the hospital which Donald thoroughly enjoyed. Richard pointed out the different departments and told Donald the names of all the staff, the cleaners, and the nurses and they all smiled and said hello.

"What lovely people they all are," said Donald.

"Okay! Donald, here we are. This is your stop. Thank you for joining us today and we hope you enjoyed the tour". Richard wheeled Donald into the room and told him that he will wait outside and take him back to the ward when they have finished his examination.

“Thank you very much young Richard,” said Donald as the lad was leaving.

“Hello, Mr. Kilbaine, I am Doctor Mike Bryant. I´m going to be looking at your eye this afternoon. The nurse will put some drops in your eye and that will allow us to see fully into the eye and check for any damage.” He positioned Donald´s wheelchair by one of the many machines in the room and told Donald that the test wouldn´t take too long.

“I’ve got all the time you needs Doctor,” said Donald. “All the time you needs, sir.”

“Okay, Mr. Kilbaine put your chin on here. You will see a light, but I want you to look in the direction I say.”

Donald rested his chin on the machine.

“OK, look to your left. Lovely, now to your right, hold it there. Now look up. Good, now look down.” The test took only a few minutes and when the Doctor had finished, he informed Donald that there was no damage to the eye whatsoever.

He spent a few minutes writing up his notes on Donald´s sheet and asked the nurse to call Richard back in so he could take Donald back to the ward. “Okay, Mr. Kilbaine, that´s us done. All is well, and you take care now.

“Thank you very much Doctor,” said Donald as Richard wheeled him out.

“How did it go?” asked nurse Judy when they got back to the ward.

“The Doctor said there is no damage and that my eye is okay,” Donald told her.

“That´s good news,” said Judy as she got Donald back into bed. “Tea will be round in about five minutes,” she said.

Donald thanked young Richard for the tour and laid back into the three plumped up pillows. “Ah! This is nice, I´m feeling a lot better now, nurse Judy, a lot better.”

-: T :-

Chapter Twelve

‘Daniel Johnson’

The following day nurse Judy came in and told Donald that he had a visitor. It was one of the four lads that had assaulted him. She asked Donald if he wanted to see him or should she send him away.

Donald asked Judy what she thought, and she informed him that the lad had asked to see him so he could apologise for his behaviour.

“Please let him in,” Donald said. He sat up and composed himself ready for the visit.

As the lad entered the room, Donald noticed that he looked so much younger than his twenty years. He was of slight build and about five foot seven. Not the hard and rough type one would associate with this kind of attack.

“Thank you for seeing me, Mr. Kilbaine,” said the young man as he came over to the side of Donald´s bed. “My name is Daniel Johnson, and I am one of the four people that attacked you in Blake Street,” he said. “I wanted to come here today to apologise to you face to face.”

Donald told the lad to sit down. He sat on the chair next to the bed and said, “I feel so ashamed of what I´ve done, and I want to say that this is not how I

normally conduct myself. Being drunk, I know, is no excuse and I don´t expect you to forgive me, but I would like to reimburse you for any damage we done to your belongings and to compensate you in some way."

During the time the lad spoke to Donald, he looked him squarely in the eye and never once looked away. He came over as sincere and genuine. "What of your friends?" asked Donald.

"I have not seen them since the attack, sir, nor do I want to. I cannot for one minute explain why I joined in and I am totally sickened by what I did."

After a few moments silence, Donald told the young lad he did not press charges because he did not want him to have a criminal record hanging over his head to ruin or mar his future. "We shall put it down to a drunken night of stupidity on your part, and as for compensation, I don´t want anything from you, other than you do all you can to change your ways and never do anything like this again," Donald said .

The lad told Donald that he would never do anything like this again and asked Donald if there is anything he can get him.

"I am feeling a lot better now and healing well," Donald said. He told the lad that he admired the strength of character it took for him to come here today and that he forgives him for his behaviour.

The young lad thanked Donald for the way he has received him and that he knows he does not deserve to be forgiven. He wished Donald well and said that he would leave him to rest. “Thank you and sorry once again, Mr. Kilbaine,” he said as he left the ward.

When Nurse Judy came back in, she asked Donald how it went and if he is okay.

“Me? Yes, I´m fine thank you Nurse. It took a lot for that lad to come and face me today. I think I done the right thing not to press charges and I have a feeling that he will do well in his life. He was certainly sorry and felt ashamed of himself.”

“Tomorrow it´s jaw x-rays, Donald, sometime mid-morning they say. They were talking about possibly removing the wires. So, if you behave yourself, it will soon be biscuits with your tea.”

“Ha-ha! I will be as good as gold I will, good as gold,” said Donald, feeling so much better than he had done for a very long time.

-: T :-

Chapter Thirteen

‘Exterminate, Exterminate’

The following morning at the shelter the manager was being informed by one of his cleaning staff that there was a young man at the door asking to speak to him.

“Did he say what it´s about?” he asked her.

“No, he just asked if it was possible to speak to the manager.”

“Okay Carol, can you show him in please?”

“Will do, Mr. Peters,” and she went off to get the young man. Carol brought the young man to the manager’s office and showed him in.

“You wanted to see me,” said the manager, “my name is Graham Peters, please take a seat. Now what can I do for you?”

“Good morning, sir. My name is Daniel Johnson, and I was one of four men that assaulted Mr. Kilbaine.”

The shelter manager said nothing, but just stared at the young man. After a few moments he said, “And why are you here, Mr. Johnson?”

The young man looked the manager in the eye and said, “I have been to the hospital, sir, and spoken to Mr. Kilbaine. He has dropped all charges against us,

and he has accepted my apology. I do though feel so ashamed with the way I behaved on that night and have now distanced myself from the other three that were involved. I want to make amends for my part in the assault and give something to the people I have offended."

He paused for a moment and then the manager said, "Go on, Mr. Johnson."

"I would like to offer my services to the shelter," he said, "I will help in any way that is needed, whether it be cleaning, painting, I have a car so I can do delivery and collection, washing tables, anything that will help. I just want the chance to… I know what I have done can never be undone, but I would like to give my future to helping the homeless, and in some way pay for what I have done."

The shelter manager said. "Daniel, is it?"

"Yes sir, Daniel."

"Well, Daniel, I commend you in wanting to make amends and accept that you are sorry for your actions. If it´s okay with you I would like to think about this matter for a day or so and come back to you with an answer. Do you have a contact number?"

"Yes sir," Daniel gave his number to the manager and thanked him for his time.

The manager stood up and thanked Daniel for coming in and said he would be in touch.

Daniel said that he would fully understand if his help was not required or wanted. He thanked Mr. Peters for seeing him, said goodbye and made his way out of the building.

After Daniel had left, the manager called me and told me of his meeting with Daniel and asked me what I thought about him helping out at the shelter. I told him that I would speak to Donald when I visit him today and get his view on things. “If the lad is genuine,” I said, “It may be a good thing for all concerned. I´ll call you this evening if that´s okay with you.”

“That´ll be fine, Jim,” he said “I´ll wait for your call.”

“Good news young Jim,” Donald said as I entered the ward, “they are going to remove the wire from my jaw on Thursday morning so I´ll not be sounding like a ‘Doctor Who Dalek’ when I speaks through me teeth.” “That´s great news, Donald.”

“And you will be able to have some bikkies with your tea,” said nurse Judy as she came in to get Donald out of the bed and into the lounge chair. “No more lazing around in bed for you young man,” she said.

“Exterminate, Exterminate,” said Donald doing his best Dalek impression.

“Keep that up and it will be an ice-cold bath for you, Donald,” joked nurse Judy, winking as she went out.

"She don´t mean it," said Donald, "good as gold she is young Jim, good as gold."

"Well, Donald, I won´t ask how you are. You are obviously in good spirits and feeling a lot better." I told Donald about Daniel Johnson offering his services and help to the shelter and that I told Mr. Peters that I would ask for your thoughts on the matter.

Donald thought for a moment and said, "Well, young Jim, the way I sees it is that the lad wants to make good for his actions and maybe he needs help as much as any other man." He paused for a few moments and then said, "If it was up to me, young Jim, I´d say yes and give the lad a chance to do some good with his life. After all, he is the only one of the four that is showing any regret or shame for their actions, so, yes, tell Mr. Peters that I am all for him employing the lad. By the way, young Jim, the bone what broke in my wrist was called the 'scaphoid' bone, it´s one of about eight small bones in the wrist and apparently they say that it won´t take too long to heal cos it was immobilised soon after it was broke. If it was left awhile it would take a lot longer, sometimes as long as six months they say, so I´ve been quite lucky, I have, quite lucky. Things yer learn, young Jim, things yer learn."

"You´ll soon be back to normal, Donald," I told him. We chatted for a while and he told me that when he is released from hospital, we should all go down to

the locks on the canal. It´s a beautiful spot to sit and have soup and rolls.

He used to take his family there for picnics at the weekends in the summer months and thought it might be lovely for Sam and James to get some fresh air away from their tablets and the TV.

“That,” I said, “is a brilliant idea and it won´t just be soup and rolls. We shall have a full-blown picnic, a picnic to end all picnics. I’m sure Jane will prepare something special for us when that day comes.”

On the way home I called into the shelter and told the manager what Donald had said.

He told me he was pleased because he thought it would be the right thing to do. “He seemed genuine and really remorseful,” said the manager, “and I don´t think he is of the same ilk as the other three involved.”

“Well, Donald believes he will do well if given the chance,” I said, “let´s hope he´s right.”

The shelter manager phoned Daniel and asked him to come and see him in the morning to discuss the ways he can help out at the shelter. Daniel thanked him and assured him that he will not let them down.

“I´ll say goodnight then, Graham, oh! Donald asked me to pass on his thanks to your wife for sewing new buttons onto his coat. He couldn´t believe that someone could be so kind.”

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Chapter Fourteen

‘First day of Freedom’

Daniel arrived at the shelter at ten o’clock the following morning and was taken on a tour of the building by the manager. Everything was explained about the running of the shelter from the kitchen to the ablutions. Graham introduced Daniel to all of the staff and volunteers. He was to help out in the kitchen with food preparation and the serving of meals at mealtimes. It was agreed that Daniel would help out two nights a week and both Saturday and Sunday afternoons.

After the first week, it became apparent that Dan, as he was now called by everyone at the shelter, was fast becoming one of the mainstays of the shelter´s staff. He could turn his hand to any task given, and he always carried out his duties with enthusiasm. His likable manner only went to prove that he was not going to throw away the chance he was given to make amends for his part in the attack on Donald.

No one at the shelter was informed of Dan´s part in the attack. The decision to keep it from them was made by Graham so as to give Dan an even keel to set out on.

Donald was discharged from the hospital the following week and agreed to stay at the shelter for a

few nights before he went back out onto the streets where he really wanted to be. He was grateful to all the people at the shelter and at the hospital who helped him through these troubled times, but he was not comfortable living alongside others. His life on the street with his belongings was the life he cherished. Even with all its ups and downs he was ready to return to Blake Street and his doorway.

Donald told Dan that he was really proud of the way he had turned things around, and that the work he does for the shelter is a credit to him. Unbeknown to Donald, Dan had been down to Blake Street one evening and cleared out all of the rubbish from the doorway, swept the steps and area leading to the door and made sure Donald, when he leaves the shelter, would have a clean doorway to return to. It may sound silly, but for Dan it meant a lot.

Donald left the shelter on the Wednesday morning, and promised that he would call in from time to time. He was happy to be on his own again and spent his first day of 'freedom', as he put it, wandering the streets and just doing his rounds as he called it. When he arrived at his doorway in Blake Street, he informed his belongings that we are home.

Night was drawing in, so he started to sort out his sleeping bag ready for the night. He poured himself a cup of tea from the flask that they made up for him at

the shelter and leaned back against the door sipping tea and surveying his kingdom. “You don´t have to live in a castle to be a king,” he told his backpack. “Ah! It´s so good to be back on me own,” he said.

The following evening, I arrived in Blake Street at about seven o´clock and Donald was arriving at the same time but from the other end of the street. “Good evening Donald,” I said as he got nearer.

“And a very good evening to you, young Jim. I´ve been out on me rounds, it´s good to see you, how´s Jane and the kids?” he asked.

“They are all well and send their best wishes. So, how´s it going now that you are fit and free?”

“It goes very well young Jim, very well indeed”.

We sat down on the steps of his doorway. Donald took off his backpack and said, “D´ya know what young Jim, there´s nuffin I likes more than walking along with my thoughts and memories. After all those weeks surrounded by people and their kindness it just feels great to be on my own again. Don´t get me wrong, I´ve met some lovely people I have, Nurse Judy, Young Richard, and his wheelchair, ha-ha, the Doctors and the people at the shelter, they´ve all been wonderful, and it was a pleasure to meet them, but it can be a bit overpowering at times. When you´ve been on your own for so long, as I have, it´s a big change it is, a big change.”

“I fully understand, Donald, so you don´t want this bottle I´ve brought you as it may be too overpowering for you, is that right?”

“No! It is not right and I´ve told you before, young Jim, not to be so daft.” We both started laughing and there was no wheezy coughing. He was certainly in fine fettle and I don´t think I´ve seen him this well since we first met.

“Jane has made you some sandwiches for tonight,” I said and handed the bag over telling him that there is a choice of either corned beef or cheese and onion.

“Well, I likes both and they shall be very much enjoyed, tell Jane.”
“I certainly will,” I said.

“Tell yer something I just remembered, young Jim. It was when you said corned beef. My dear old Mum, bless her, used to make what she called “corned beef hash” lovely it was, really tasty. She used to make it in a big dish, I mean a big dish, big enough for about eight helpings it was. It had slices of potato, shredded cabbage, sliced onions, corned beef and baked beans and she would layer it all till it got to the top of the dish. The last layer was the potato slices, and then she´d sprinkle an oxo cube over it, oh! Tomato puree went in it as well, then she would stick it in the oven for about two hours. It would come out with a nice

crispy top and the taste was to die for. It was like a meal on its own it was, a meal on its own."

I could see that in his mind he was tasting it all over again. "I can hear her now," he said, "cabbage, corned beef, beans, onions, potato, that´s one layer, three more layers to go."

"Donald, shut up," I said, "you´re making my mouth water. I think I´ll get Jane to make us one, what did you say she called it?"

"Corned beef hash," he said proudly, "she was a good cook was Mum, a good cook she was. Money was short in those days and she used to say, "It´s a really cheap and tasty meal."

We both sat there in silence with a plate of corned beef hash in front of us. Well! Dreaming of a plate of 'corned beef hash'.

"Okay then, Donald, I´m going to leave you to settle down for the night and I´ll see you at the weekend, it will probably be on Sunday with Jane and the kids, if that´s alright."

"That will be great, young Jim. I´ll be looking forward to it."

As I got to the end of Blake Street I looked back and, true to form, Donald was talking to his belongings.

"It was nice to see young Jim again and have one of our chats." He unrolled and laid out his sleeping bag and said, "I´ll have a nice cup of tea and one of me

sarnies, I think, and then it´ll be head down for some kip.”

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Chapter Fifteen

‘Bangers, Burgers and Treasure’

“We`ll load everything into the trailer first and then go and pick up Donald. Then we can head off to the canal,” said Jane.

“That sounds good to me,” I said. “Right, make sure we have everything, food, picnic table and chairs, and anything else you can think of.”

“I´ve double checked the list,” said Jane.

“Right! off we go then, it´ll be a nice surprise for him because he thinks we´re having soup and rolls on his doorstep. The trailer is loaded and hooked up, so I´m ready when you are,” I said.

“Okay, come on, into the car, let´s go,” said Jane chivvying up the kids. “If you’re not in the car in two minutes you will not be coming with us,” Samantha and James came running and were in the car, belted up and ready to go in seconds. “Shame you can´t get ready for school that quick,” said Jane.

Donald was sat in his doorway waiting for our arrival and seemed puzzled when we all arrived in the car.

“C´mon,” James shouted, “we´re going on an adventure.”

Donald looked at me puzzled, “What kind of adventure?” he asked.

“You´ll find out,” I told him. We put his backpack in the trailer and he climbed into the passenger seat. Jane sat in the back with the kids and then we set off for Donald’s surprise.

As I pulled off the road and followed the track that leads to the canal, Donald said, “Ha-ha! I knows where we are going, we´re going to the locks, I bet.”

“Yes,” We all said at the same time, “and we are going to have the picnic to end all picnics,” I said. I backed the car and trailer into a small clearing. It was the perfect place to set up the table and chairs. We were quite close to the lock and we had a beautiful view of the canal. We all helped set up the table and lay the plates and cups. I set up the bar-b-que and got the charcoal burning nicely ready to cook the sausages and burgers. “I will be frying up onions to go with the burgers, and we have finger rolls for the ‘bangers’ and buns for the burgers,” I told Donald. “How does that sound?” I asked him.

“That sounds perfect to me young Jim, just perfect,” he said.

“Jane has made up flasks of coffee, tea, and orange squash, and there is a big trifle for afters. I shall be ready to serve up in about half an hour, so you´ll have to occupy yourselves until I call you all”.

“Okay,” said Donald. “James and Samantha, let´s see how many of those birds on the water you can identify and how many types of tree you can name.”

Donald and the kids each took a chair and sat by the canal ready to start.

“That big tree overhanging the water over there look.” Donald pointed to it and said, “What do you think it´s called?” Both Samantha and James looked puzzled, so Donald asked them to describe it.

“Well, it´s got very long thin green branches coming downwards to the water.”

“Well done James and they look as though they are drooping or weeping.”

“Willow, it´s a willow, weeping willow,” said Samantha.

“Well done,” said Donald, “and what are those birds under the branches on the water?”

“Ducks” said James.

“What type of ducks are they?” Donald asked.

“Don´t know,” said James.

“Are they Mallards?” Samantha asked.

“Yes, they are, well done,” said Donald, “and do you know which is the male and which is the female?” Puzzled looks again from the kids. “Okay, I will tell you. The ones with the brown speckled plumage are the ladies, and they are called hens or ducks. The ones with the glossy green heads and grey on their wings and belly are the men, and they are called drakes.”

“How do you know all this?” asked James.

“Well, when I was a boy, I used to live in the countryside and I had loads of books, Observer books they was, and they were on all different subjects, trees, birds, flowers, insects, you name it, there was a book for it. All of us kids used to go round ticking off everything we saw, that´s how I got to know so much.”

“We don´t know many birds,” said Samantha.

“You do,” said Donald.

“What does a Robin look like?”

“He´s got a red chest,” said James.

“Well done, and a chicken, what does that look like?”

James started laughing and said, “A chicken’s not a bird.”

“What is it then?” asked Donald.

“It´s a farm animal,” said James.

“They do live on farms, that´s right,” said Donald.

“They are birds because they lay eggs,” said Samantha.

“That’s correct,” said Donald, “but turtles and snakes lay eggs, and they´re not birds, are they. I´ll tell you what,” said Donald, “make a list of any creature that lays eggs, and we can talk about them next week when I sees you.”

Samantha was happy to be given a topic to research, there was nothing she enjoyed more.

“C´mon you lot, dinner is served,” called out Jane. “Come and get it while it´s hot, get a plate and bun or roll and Dad will give you each a sausage and burger. There are also some baked potatoes but be careful taking the foil off as they will be piping hot.”

Everyone got their food and sat at the table. The weather was warm and sunny, perfect for a picnic.

“This is a wonderful treat,” said Donald.

“It´s a treat for us too,” said Jane.

“You were right about this being a lovely spot for a picnic,” I said.

“I used to come here with my family years ago and we had some great times here. We never had sausages and burgers though, these are really tasty,” said Donald.

“Ah! I knew we´d forget something,” said Jane, “cheese slices to go on the burgers.”

“Too late to worry about that now,” I said.

“Can we get some of those books that Donald used to have, Mum?” asked Samantha.

“Observer books? Yes of course, which one’s did you want?” asked Jane.

“The one about the birds,” said Samantha.

“And the one for the trees, please,” said James.

“That´ll be my fault,” said Donald, “we was doing some spotting over by the canal while you was cooking lunch.”

"Well, you´ve certainly got them interested, Donald, that´s the main thing, and it´s good for them to learn about nature," I said.

"After you´ve had lunch," said Donald to Samantha and James, "we´ll have a treasure hunt. I´ll give you a list of things that you have to go and find, but you must stay in sight of the camp."

"That´ll be great fun," said James. "The first one back with all the items is the winner, how´s that sound?"

"It sounds good to me," said Sam.

"And me," said James.

When we had all eaten and had a cup of tea, Donald made a list of the ten items that had to be collected. They were an oak leaf, a pebble, a piece of bark, a feather, a sweet wrapper, a piece of newspaper, a plastic spoon, a sock, a piece of string and a four-leaf clover, but a three-leaf clover would be accepted. If, after an hour no one has finished, it will be the one with the most items that wins. "I will bang the frying pan with a spoon to signal that the hour is up," said Donald.

He is absolutely loving this, I thought to myself. I have never seen this side of him before. He must have done this with his own children all those years ago when he brought them here for their picnics. I noticed earlier when he spoke of coming here with his family

that he felt good talking about it, unlike the last time when he cried a lot. Maybe Jane was right and that it is a healing process of some sort, coupled with the fact that he is out of hospital and feeling better health-wise, of course.

"Right, then kids, you´ve got your list, are you both ready to start?" asked Donald.

"Yes, we´re ready," They both replied.

"I´ll count down from three, wait for it James… Three, Two, One, Go!"

And off they went running towards the bushes.

"They are really enjoying this," said Jane, "it was a great idea Donald. Did you play this with your children when you came here before?" asked Jane.

"I did indeed, and they too enjoyed the treasure hunt, as I calls it. Me and my Tina used to love watching them run around trying to find all the items, ha-ha! They was happy times."

"You seem to find it easier to talk about them now, Donald."

"I do, young Jane, after me and Jim talked about the Christmases we had in those days it seemed to flick some kind of a switch inside me, and I feel that I should be talking of them and those times, not shying away and bottling it up all the time, I s´pose… well, they´ve got about ten minutes and I start banging that frying pan."

As Donald said that, James came running around the car excitedly shouting “I´ve got all ten, I´ve got em all.”

“Okay,” said Donald, “let´s check them against the list. I´ll read out the item and you lay it on the table. Oak leaf, yes, pebble, yes, bark, yes, feather, yes, sweet wrapper, yes, newspaper, yes, plastic spoon, yes, string, yes, four or three leaf clover, yes, sock…?

James lifted his foot up and said “Here´s my sock.”

“No, that´s no good,” said Donald, “it has to be on the table or it doesn´t count.”

Jane and I started laughing as James raced to take off his shoe and sock. He put the sock on the table and smiled the smile of an Olympic champion.

Donald very slowly checked all of the items on the table with his list, and stood silently rubbing his chin. It seemed like hours for James, and then Donald said, “We have a winner! Well done young James.”

At that moment Samantha came back and she, too, had collected all of the items. Donald checked Sam´s items the same as he did for James and then announced, “In second place it´s… Samantha!”

All of us cheered and clapped.

“What´s my prize?” asked James.

“Your prizes are the fun you both had hunting for the Treasure. Well! Was it fun?” he asked them.

“Yes, it was the best fun ever,” said Samantha and James agreed. Samantha took a photo of all the items

on the table, and then one of Donald holding up James arm as if he was a winning boxer. “These will be for my journal,” she said.

“Who would like tea and chocolate biscuits?” Jane asked everyone.

Four hands flew up as we all shouted. “Yes, please.”

After tea and biscuits, it was time to start packing everything away and making tracks. We all agreed that it had been a really wonderful day and that we must do it again soon.

We dropped Donald off at Blake Street and he thanked us for taking him out for the day.

“It was truly a lovely thing to do,” he said.

As I got to the end of the street, I looked in the rear-view mirror and could see Donald in his doorway.

“Well, what a smashing day that was,” he said to his belongings as he was laying them out ready to get settled. “They really are a wonderful family, and the kids, they enjoyed the treasure hunt they did, really enjoyed it. Jane has done me some sandwiches for tonight, bless her and I´ve got me flask, ha-ha! Happy days, happy days.”

-: T :-

Chapter Sixteen

‘Chucking it down’

It had been raining all day and looked like it was not going to let up any time soon. The strong winds made matters worse by blasting the rain in all directions. Donald was hunched up in the corner of the doorway trying to stay dry. He had pulled the bright orange survival bag over his sleeping bag to prevent it getting wet. He was nice and warm and did not want to move to the next street for tea when the Salvation Army van turned up. If he did, he knew he would get soaked through, and the rest of the night would be unbearable. “Cor, it´s really chucking it down,” he told his belongings. “There´s no way this will stop before morning”. At that moment he heard heavy stamping footsteps coming fast down the street. “Some poor soul has been caught out in this,” he thought to himself. They´ll be soaked through to the skin.

The runner in the rain stopped at Donald´s doorway and said, “Hi Donald, it´s Daniel Johnson from the shelter, I´ve brought you a flask of tea and some soup. Thought you might be in need of something warm.”

“Get in here out of the rain, you must be soaked,” Donald told him.

“It´s okay I came in the car. It´s parked around the corner. I didn´t realise I could bring it down here.” He gave Donald the two flasks and got in as far as he could near the boarded-up door to stay out of the rain.

“This really is kind of you, young Daniel. I didn´t fancy moving to where the Sally bash van parks. You’re a bit of a life saver you are.”

“Well, I didn´t like the idea of you out in this with nothing to eat or drink, so I made a quick dash down here. I will have to get back to the shelter now to dish out the meals. We are absolutely packed out tonight.”

“Well thank you very much indeed, Daniel.”

“You are more than welcome, Donald,” he said, as he set off running to his car.

“Well, what a lovely surprise that was,” he told his belongings. “He´s really turned things around has that lad. I am so pleased that I didn´t ruin his life back then by getting him locked up.” It may be raining, he thought to himself, but inside the sun sure is shining.

Daniel got back to the shelter just in time for the evening serving. He quickly dried off and changed into something dry and then went to the serving area to start serving out the meals. “No! You are the real life-saver, Donald, not me,” he said to himself as he started his routine of dishing out the meals with a big smile, and a ‘You can have as much as you want lads’. He hadn´t

realised that life could be so rewarding, well, not until Donald entered into his, he didn´t.

"I hope Donald is keeping dry," said Jane coming away from the window. "It´s absolutely throwing it down out there."

"He´ll be tucked up warm and dry," I said. "If he has a problem, he´s got my mobile number, but I´m sure he´s okay."

"Right, I´m going up," said Jane, "early start in the morning, don´t forget, I´m travelling over to Mum's and I don´t want to sit in all that traffic like I did last time."

"I´ll finish up here and be up in a minute or two," I said. I checked in on the kids and they were both sound asleep.

Donald felt so much better having had some hot soup and a nice cup of tea. Not having to go to the Sally bash wagon and risk getting soaked was also a big factor in his feeling so good, he thought. He started to think about all of the homeless people that he comes across on his rounds, a lot of them are just youngsters, makes yer wonder what went so wrong in their lives for them to be living rough, alone on the streets. I wonder if they have a Fraser family looking out for them, a Jim and a Jane who care enough to help them

get by. How many of them have new trainers or warm sleeping bags, he thought.

"That was a good thing you did last night for Donald," said the manager of the shelter to Daniel when he came in the following afternoon.

"I didn´t like the idea of him not having anything to eat out there, and it was really chucking it down," said Daniel.

"Yes, there was a lot of flooding and apparently quite a lot of trees were blow down blocking the roads. They said on the news that it was one of the worst storms we´ve had in years. So, good on you Dan for what you did last night".

Jane turned back and headed for home. She had been trying to get to her mother's, but the traffic situation was chaotic with trees still blocking the roads. The emergency services were working flat out, and council workers were cutting and removing the fallen trees, but it was going to take some time. When she finally got home she phoned her mother to let her know that she had arrived home safely and said she would visit her sometime next week.

Donald stayed dry and had a reasonably comfortable night. The roads were still wet, and the rain had turned into fine drizzle. Thankfully, his

belongings too stayed dry and now he was sat sipping the last of his tea, waiting for the drizzle to stop and for the sun to come out and warm the day.

At work there was nothing really we could get on with because the power lines were blown out in the storm, and as we are a printing firm our job requires electricity for the computers and the printing machines. I spent a few hours organising what I could for when the power comes back on and decided to head off home early.

In the lower part of the town the streets were flooded, some to the depths of about six to eight feet. Residents had moved to the upstairs level of their properties and were trying to save as many of their belongings as they could. Army lads were going from house to house in rubber boats with outboard motors rescuing people and ferrying them to the emergency centres which had been set up in the town. Firemen had set up and were pumping flood water from the flooded streets, but to no avail. More rain was forecast for later in the day. The Salvation Army and other charitable organisations were in full swing helping any one in need or trouble.

The homeless shelter was full but still took in people from the street. Camp beds were laid out in rows and the kitchen staff were working flat out

providing hot drinks and sandwiches at the same time as preparing meals for the evening. Graham, the manager of the shelter, was grateful to all the volunteers for turning up to help even though it was not their shift. He had not seen the shelter this busy in all the time he had been there and that was coming up for eight years.

When I arrived home, Jane explained how she couldn't get to her Mum's because of the storm, and that she had made some stew for us to take down to Donald. I went up and changed into more suitable clothing and we made our way down to Blake Street. The drizzle had now turned into heavy rain and was bouncing back up off the road. The car wipers were on the fastest setting and still it was hard to see the way ahead.

"I´ve not seen it this bad ever, I don´t think," said Jane.

When we arrived at Blake Street, Donald was in his doorway out of the rain. He smiled at us both and said that he was as snug as a bug in a rug now that the wind had dropped.

"It´s only when the wind picks up that it sends the rain in," he said. He told us that Dan had turned up last night and how proud he was of the lad. "And your timing is perfect," he said, "cos I´ve just run out of me tea I have, just run out."

“Well, we´ve brought you some hot stew and bread rolls and a fresh flask of tea to see you through,” said Jane.

“Do you think it would be best for you to go to the shelter for tonight?” I asked him.

“No, I´ll be fine young Jim, I´ll be fine I will.”

“Okay, Donald, but promise me if it gets too bad you will go to the shelter.”

“Yes, I promise you, I will go if it gets worse.”

“Oh! I´ve brought this down for you. It´s a small a radio. You plug the earpiece into whichever ear you want and turn it on here… look. It may help pass the time for you. I have got some spare batteries here too for when these run out.”

“That is nice of you, young Jim, I´ll be able to listen to all sorts now, thank you very much, that´s really thoughtful of you.”

“Don´t you mention it, it was in one of the drawers at home and never gets used nowadays, so I thought you might like it, and here´s some more of that ‘keep out the cold’ lotion you like so much.”

“Ha-ha! And keep out the cold it certainly does, young Jim. I puts a little drop in me tea at night I do, just a drop to warm the cockles and no more, I don´t drink it from the bottle as a drink, yer know, it´s purely night-time central heating it is.”

“Right Donald, now that we know you are okay, we shall get off home and get ready for the kids coming

home from school. Take care and remember if it gets too bad get yourself to the shelter, okay?"

"I will do sir," and then he saluted with a big smile on his face.

We made a dash for the car and then drove home happy in the knowledge that Donald would be okay.

Donald plugged his earpiece in and turned on the radio. After fiddling with the tuning, he got a local radio station and settled back listening to the music. He did of course tell his belongings that he had a new radio, and how grateful he was to young Jim and Jane for their kindness and thoughtfulness. "I´ve not listened to the radio for years, yer know, what a difference this´ll make." He poured himself a cup of tea and added a few drops of central heating then leaned back on his door to enjoy the music.

-: T :-

Chapter Seventeen

'Keep on Running'

After another day of continuous rainfall, it finally stopped, but it would take a few more days for the water in the flooded areas to totally drain away. The numbers at the shelter were starting to dwindle down to the normal figures and Donald was happy to be able to do his rounds, as he calls it.

A lot of houses were still flooded but not so much as the first day. The residents' gardens were being filled with their flood damaged furniture, carpets, and white goods, and an army of insurance brokers were busy sorting out their clients' claims. The sandbags that had been used were slowly being removed, and dehumidifiers were at work in most of the properties. Some of the families were moved into hotels by their insurance companies, and those without insurance, for whatever reason, were toughing it out and doing the best they could.

Power was back on and we were catching up with the backlog at work. I always find it amazing how mother nature in all her beauty can also, at the drop of a hat, demonstrate her awesome power, reminding us all that we are merely pawns in her game and must work to her rules and agenda.

The weeks passed by and things were steadily getting back to normal. Summer was just around the corner and I would visit Donald once in mid-week, normally on a Wednesday evening, and we the family would all go down every other weekend on the Sunday afternoon.

Donald, too, was settling back into his old routine of doing his rounds, and visits to the Salvation Army wagon for tea in the evenings. Doing his rounds involved walking down through the town to the park where he would sit on one of the benches and watch the swans and ducks on the lake. He loved it when they had their young.

There was always something going on to watch, mothers with their children feeding the ducks, people out walking their dogs, joggers and cyclists, people-watching was the best way to pass the time, he thought. Some days he would give himself a task such as how many people were wearing blue or how many dogs he could spot. He´d give himself a different task each day. Today´s task was how many learner drivers could he spot on his way to and from the park. It was four on the way down and he guessed it may end up at ten by the time he got back to Blake Street. He now had the added bonus, of course, of listening to music on his radio as he sat at the lake, and, because the days were

getting warmer, he thought that this was his little piece of heaven here on earth.

"This will be good," he thought to himself, as a young father was taking the stabiliser wheels off the back of his little girl's bike. The little girl was jumping up and down with excitement and her father was telling her to calm down. The little girl sat on the bike and her father held the back of the saddle. "Off you go then," he said, as he ran behind her still holding onto the back of the saddle.

"Don´t let go yet Dad," the little girl was shouting out.

"I won´t," said the Dad.

Donald laughed to himself because the Dad had let the saddle go and was now just running behind her saying,

"That´s great Susie, keep it going."

The little girl was giggling loudly and said, "Let go now Dad."

"I´m not holding on to you," he said. "I let go ages ago, you´ve been riding on your own. She peddled off down the pathway and Dad stopped running, he just stood watching her with that proud Dad smile on his face.

Now because Donald had been through this twice with his two kids, he knew what was coming. At the end of the path the little girl had to turn to ride back to

Dad, and as she turned, off she came. The little girl was giggling like mad as she picked herself and the bike up.

"It´s that first turn when they lean and realise that there is no stabiliser wheel there to stop them, so gravity takes over," said Donald to no one in particular.

She got back on the bike and Dad shoved her off again. Her little legs were going like the clappers and she was shouting out, "Look Dad, I´m doing it, I´m doing it."

Donald smiled to himself and thought that the young girl and the young Dad have just made a wonderful memory that will stay with them both forever. He could also image the little girl telling her mum when she gets home that she can ride without stabilisers, and that she´s a big girl now.

As the little girl rode off, Donald called out "Well done young lady," and gave a big round of applause.

She shouted thank you, but never took her eyes of the path in front.

The little girl and her running Dad left the park and Donald thought to himself, "Ha-ha! He´ll be worn out by the time they get home," and at that moment, the song 'Keep on Running,' by The Spencer Davies Group started to play on his radio and Donald laughed out loud at the timing.

As Donald left the park to make his way back, he spotted his fifth learner driver, "That´s five," he said to

himself, “soon have me ten.” He decided to walk along Park Avenue which runs parallel to Main Street. It´s a much quieter and more scenic route. It was a pleasant afternoon with warm spring sunshine glistening through the trees. How different it is, he thought, to how it was just a few weeks ago when we had that storm.

At the end of Park Avenue, Donald turned into the town square where the memorial stands. He sat down on one of the benches and about five or six pigeons landed at his feet nodding and pecking at the ground as they searched around him for food, but they were out of luck this time. He promised them he would save some of the bread from his sandwiches and feed them next time he comes this way.

At the far end of the square, on the tower of the town hall, the clock showed six-thirty and Donald told himself that he had better make tracks if he was to get his feet looked at again by the nurse at the shelter.

He got to the shelter at six-forty-five and made his way to the nurses’ office. “Hello, Nurse Bishop. I´ve come for me feet again if that´s okay with you,” said Donald.

“Come in Donald, I´ll be two minutes and then we shall sort you out. How have you been?”

“I´ve been fine, thank you Nurse Bishop, really fine.

She told Donald to go to the treatment room and that she will be along shortly.

“Will do,” said Donald, and off he went.

There was a young lad in the treatment room. He had his hand bandaged up. He looked up at Donald and said, “Hi, I´m Dave.”

“Hello Dave, my name is Donald. What have you done there young man?”

“I fell on the pavement and put mi hand out to stop mi´sen, and the nurse says I´ve got a bad sprain, hurts like crazy it does, but there´s nowt broken. She´s gone to get me some pain killers. She´ll be back in a minute if that´s who you´re waiting for.”

“I´ve seen her, she knows I´m here. You´ll have to be more careful out there young Dave, where you from, you sounds like you’re from up north somewhere?”

“I´m from a place called Tadcaster, between Leeds and York it is.”

“How´d yer end up down here then?” asked Donald.

“I was in the Army, and when I came out I couldn´t get a job or pay for lodgings, so it was the streets for me.”

“When did you leave the army?” asked Donald.

“Oh! must have been four years since, aye ´appen it was, four years, been on t’ streets ever since tha knows.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting young man, here are some Ibuprofen. They should help with the pain. Try not to use the wrist, and it should get better soon”.

“Thanks, nurse,” said the young lad.

“Mr. Peters, he´s the manager of the shelter, would like a word with you about staying here and getting you onto a program that will get you back to work,” said Nurse Bishop.

“That would be fantastic,” said the lad.

“C´mon then, I´ll take you to his office. Be right back, Donald,” she said.

“I´ll still be here, nurse,” said Donald.

When the nurse returned to see to Donald´s feet, she said that young Dave was a nice lad and, for someone young, the program was the best way to go.”

“Well, I hope it works out for him, he’s served his country and he deserves a break,” Donald said.

“Right, let´s have those trainers and socks off and give your feet a good soak before we do your nails.”

“That´ll do for me,” said Donald. Donald loved having his feet done, he said it makes your whole body feel great. “Will I be able to get some more of that powder for me feet?” asked Donald.

“Yes, of course. I´ll go and get you some while your feet soak. I suppose you will be requiring a nice cup of tea and a couple of bikkies,” she said.

“Ha-ha! That I will, nurse, that I will.

Donald left the shelter after he´d been given a meal and had his flask re-filled. He made his way to Blake Street to settle down for the night, thinking what a lovely day it had been. “That young girl on her bike made me chuckle,” Donald told his belongings, “and I´m glad that the young lad, Dave his name was, is getting a chance to get his life back. They are good people at the shelter, they are, good people. Right, cup of tea, some music and then it´s lights out, my friends.”

-: T :-

Chapter Eighteen

‘Green Grass and Brass Plates’

It was a Wednesday evening in early May, and I was on my way to see Donald. I had had a good day at work and was really enjoying my stroll through the city back streets. It was warm and I had removed my pullover which in the early hours of the day was very much needed, but not so much now.

Donald was in the process of sorting out his backpack when I arrived and said that he was doing a bit of spring cleaning. Jane had got Donald some t-shirts and thinner shirts for the coming summer months, and she suggested the thick clothes be washed and cleaned. She told Donald that they could be kept at our house until the winter, that way he would not have too much weight to carry around all day. Donald thought that that was a brilliant idea and thanked her for her kind consideration.

“How´s it going then, Donald?” I asked him.

“Nearly finished,” he said, “that pile there is what has to go to Jane, and all me summer stuff is in me pack. It feels a lot lighter now it does, a lot lighter.”

I sat down on the top step of the three and asked Donald if there was anything he needed.

“No, I´ve got everything I needs, thank you, young Jim,” he said. “How´s your day been?” he asked.

I told him that I´d had a good day and that it could not have gone any better. We had won a big contract with the council to produce all of their information pamphlets, books, and posters for the foreseeable future. That includes the schools, hospital… the list is endless. It´s certainly a game changer for us.

“That is great news,” said Donald, “I´m really pleased for you.”

Donald had finished his spring cleaning and put all of his winter clothing into two carrier bags for me to take home to Jane. He then sat himself down and readied himself for one of our chats that we both enjoy so much.

“How´s the radio going, Donald? Is it still working okay?” I asked him.

“D´ya know what, young Jim, it´s absolutely brilliant, it is. I listens to all sorts of programs, I do. It´s not only music yer know, there´s loads of other programs too. Opened up a whole new world for me it has, a whole new world.”

“Here, I found these for you, they´re the right ear plugs for it, so you can listen in stereo now.”

“Thank you for that young Jim, I´ll give em a try out tonight”.

Donald told me about the little girl and her bike, and of Dave the young ex-soldier. He said how pleased he was for him, getting the chance of joining the program would certainly turn things round for him.

"It´s May now, init," said Donald.

"Yep, sure is," I said, "summer is definitely on its way." What came next took me totally by surprise.

"It was May when the house caught fire…. I´d been at work and had to stay a bit later than normal because one of the machine's compressors had blown. Seemed to take the engineers ages to fix it, and we all had to stay because the bottles were needed for the next day. The bottles would go from us to the bottling area and be filled with whatever it was that was needed. There was gold top, silver top, and the tall thin bottles we used for the sterilised milk. There was also smaller bottles that were for the schools… milk and orange juice they was for. Anyway, we eventually finishes at about six o'clock, we´d normally finish at four. So, I had missed my normal bus and had to wait for the six twenty-five that would take me the long way round, but I didn´t mind as long as I got home, that was the main thing. I gets off the bus and I has to walk down Farmer's Way and then turn into the bottom of our street. As I turns I can see a lot of blue and red flashing lights at the far end of the street. There were Police cars, fire engines, and Ambulances and loads of people, loads of people there was. As I got nearer, I

could see smoke and flames coming from our house, it was like I had been hit hard in the chest with a sledgehammer. I couldn´t breathe, my mind was racing, and I was starting to panic, screaming to the Police officers. They just kept shouting at me, 'Stay back sir, Stay back.' 'That´s my house,' I screamed. 'My family, where´s my family?' I tried to push past the officers but was forced back. 'You can´t go in there, sir,' they kept telling me. 'Stay back!' But it was like I was being driven by some unknown force. I pushes past the officer and then two of the firemen stopped me and told me that there is nothing can be done as the fire is out of control. I was trembling from head to toe with fear. I couldn´t seem to speak, I was just mumbling all the time, my family, where´s my family. They led me to the ambulance and told me that my wife and two children were inside and had died in the fire. The firemen started bringing out their bodies one by one but would not let me see them. The Police had moved the crowd back to the other side of the road. One of the firemen came out of one of the top windows and shouted that the house is clear. He then came down the ladder, his face was black around his breathing apparatus, and he was still shaking. He went and sat by the fire tender, he looked totally exhausted. The water hoses were still going even when the flames were extinguished, and the stench was overpowering. There were two fire crews fighting the fire, two of

them, there was. Tina and the children were taken away in body bags by the coroner´s car. I just sat there numb, shaking and beyond any sense of belief or understanding. ‘Come with us now, please sir.’I heard the voice but had no idea who it was or what they were meaning. ‘You are in shock, sir, we need to check you over.’ “Where are they taking my family? I want to see my family,’ I kept telling them. But all they would say is that it is not possible.

I have no recollection of what went on over the next two weeks, other than vague images and the endless words of sympathy and visits, cards, and the local vicar discussing arrangements. I could see the pain that Tina´s parents were suffering and yet they were still trying to console and look after me.

On the morning of the funeral when the two cars arrived with the coffins and their black coated entourage, it was Tina´s Dad who took my arm and saw me safely through the day. As I sat in the church it was hymns, prayers, tears, and numbness… total numbness.

I can remember the three coffins. Tina´s was oak, and the children´s were small and white. There were pictures of them on display. At the graveside there were black coats, the vicar´s white and black robes, green grass, and brass plates with their names engraved. Heaven and God were words repeated over and over again. The ribbon hanging from the bible was

black, and at that moment I had never felt such total loss in all my life. I felt detached from it all and from everyone around me, and it stayed like that for years."

Donald went quiet. I didn´t know what to say or even if I should say something. After a few moments Donald continued, "A week or so after the funeral I went back to the house and just stood there looking at the boarded-up windows and blackened walls, the roof had collapsed. I stood there for quite a while, I did. Then I turned and walked away, just kept walking, I did. I didn´t want to go back to the B&B they´d put me in or to Tina´s parents, just walked away. I remember the first night I slept behind skips at the back of the supermarket. It was cold and uncomfortable but I didn´t mind that at all.

All I took with me was the two photographs, one of me mum and dad and one of Tina, Jane, and young Donald James."

Again, Donald went quiet. It seemed that his mind was back in those terrible days. He composed himself and carried on. He said that he couldn´t remember much detail about that time, and that he could only recall the images that were imprinted in his mind. It was certainly a very sad time in Donald´s life and one he said he would not wish on anyone. "I really don´t know what to say," I told Donald, "other than I am so sorry for your loss, my friend."

"It´s you and your wonderful family that have made me want to share my story with you," he said, "and maybe seeing the little girl on her bike and that young lad, Dave, and Daniel from the shelter of course, who knows… but hey, I feel so much better now than I have done in many years."

"And it´s good to see you so well," I said.

"Tell yer what though, yer don´t know how to handle somfin' like that, young Jim. When it happens it seems that it´s happening around you and the system of how it´s dealt with just happens. You know, the vicar, the funeral, death certificates. I s´pose it was Tina´s mum 'n' dad done all that. All I remember is the overwhelming sadness and loneliness that had consumed me. Couldn´t think straight, I couldn´t, little things though seemed to have stuck in my head. I remember saying that I don´t have a black tie.

What got me the most was that I never got to see them to say my goodbyes, young Jim. They said that the bodies were… well, you know, they said it´s best I remembers them as they were. We was having such a wonderful life, we was, and it was wonderful, Jim.

That´s it, that´s how it was and now after all these years it seems like, well, I don´t know what it seems like really, ha-ha! I must be losing me marbles, young Jim.

What I think I´m trying to say is, thanks to you and your Jane things are a lot better now."

We both sat there silently for a few moments and then Donald said, “It´s been a lovely day today, young Jim, really sunny and warm, and I´ve got all me belongings in order, I have.”

“I´ve brought you some more batteries for your radio, by the way,” I said.

“That´s very kind of you” beamed Donald.

“Jane and I have been thinking if it´s okay with you, that on Sunday we pick you up at about twelve o’clock and you come back to our house and have dinner with us, which will be… wait for it ... corned beef hash. What do you say to that, my friend?”

“I says that that would be blooming marvellous,” said Donald, “blooming marvellous.”

“That´s great,” I said, “Jane will be so pleased.”

-: T :-

Chapter Nineteen

‘Treasure Squad and Chalk Pits’

We were all up early on the Sunday morning, it was a lovely day and Jane decided that we eat outside on the patio. We opened the patio doors and carried the dining table out, and while Jane was busy in the kitchen, the kids and I set up the table for our special meal.

James and Samantha brought out the chairs and then made up small name cards to place on the table. “This way everyone will know where they have to sit,” said James, as he set them out.

The previous evening, Donald went to the shelter and explained that he would be having lunch at our house, and would it be okay for him to have a shower so he could change his clothes because he did not want to smell. “Not only can you have a shower, Donald,” said Nurse Bishop, “but you can have a haircut and beard trim because the hairdresser is here tonight”.

“That´s fantastic, thank you, you´re very kind,” said Donald, “after all, I wants to look my best if I´m going out for a meal, ha-ha, going out for a meal.”

“They certainly think the world of you, Donald,” said the nurse.

“D´yer know what,” said Donald, “our friendship, me and young Jim that is, started because one evening when young Jim was walking home I asked him if he could spare a pound. He didn´t ignore me like people normally do, instead he asks if he can sit down with me, and then we chatted away for a few hours, we did. Anyway, he says he would come and see me again and bring me some things and that´s exactly what he done. Before he left though he gave me a five-pound note, he did.

They´re a really lovely family they are, really lovely.”

“They certainly do look out for you,” said Nurse Bishop. Now go and get your shower and I´ll let the hairdresser know that you are on his list, and yes! Before you ask, you can have a cup of tea and some bikkies.”

“You are an angel, Nurse Bishop, a real angel.”

“Oh, be off with you,” she said, laughing.

Donald was rolling up his sleeping bag and packing his belongings away ready for his day out. His belongings were fully informed ‘of course’ of the special corned beef hash meal ‘like his Mum used to make’ that he was going to have, and how he was really looking forward to it.

Donald had changed all his clothes for clean, had a shower, haircut, beard trim and was really feeling on top of the world as he sat waiting for me to collect him. "Good morning, Donald," I called out as I pulled up by his doorway. Funny how I always refer to it as being 'his doorway' I thought to myself.

"And Good morning to you, young Jim," Donald replied with a big smile.

"By the left," I said, amazed at his well-cut hair and beard trim, "you look like a new man, my friend, and very 'dapper' too if I may say."

"Well, it does feel good to feel good, if yer knows what I mean, young Jim."

"I know exactly what you mean, Donald. C´mon then, let´s make a move. Jane and the kids are looking forward to seeing you."

When we arrived home, we went through to the kitchen and Jane came across and gave Donald a big hug, saying, "Jim told me all about your chat yesterday, Donald, how are you feeling?"

"I am feeling on top of the world," said Donald with a smile the size of the 'Wembley Stadium'.

"I think it done me a world of good talking about things, and I find it so easy to talk to your Jim about things, I do."

"Hello Donald!" shouted Samantha and James as they came running in from the patio.

“We´ve got everything set up for dinner,” said James excitedly, “and Mum´s made your mum´s hash, it smells lovely.”

“Dýer know what, young James, that´s what I always told me mum, that it smells great when it´s being cooked, ha-ha! I´m looking forward to this, I am.”

“Well, it´s going to be about half an hour, so you can all leave me to get on with it. Go and sit in the sun. Jim, you can open the wine for me. Samantha and James will have Fanta.

“It´s a lovely garden you have young Jim, really lovely.”

“It´s got nothing to do with me Donald. Jane is the one with the green fingers. I´m the one who likes to sit and admire it with a nice glass of wine,” I said, laughing.

“Okay Samantha,” said Donald, “just in case you thought that I´d forgotten, what does “oviparous” mean?”

Samantha answered with a big proud smile, “That´s animals that produce young by the means of laying eggs.”

“Ah! The power of Google,” said Jane.

“Well, she´s took the time to look it up so that´s the most important thing,” I added.

“What is Google?” asked Donald.

"I´ll show you, Donald," said Samantha. She turned her laptop on and while waiting for it to start she said to Donald, "Right, Donald, if I want to know something I can search for it on my computer. Ah! here look, that´s the search bar and I type in there want I want to know."

Donald was looking at the laptop with keen interest.

"So I will type in… What is the name for animals that lay eggs… then hit this key, and up comes this… look." Samantha hit the return key and the following appeared on the screen…

Oviparous animals are animals that lay their eggs, with little or no other embryonic development within the mother. This is the reproductive method of most fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and the monotremes).

"WOW," said Donald, "that is Fantastic."

"That´s how I learn about everything. Now, I don´t know what ***Monotremes*** are so I can enter that," Sam explained. She entered ***Monotremes*** and told Donald to tap the enter key. He did that and up popped the following…

Any of Various egg-laying animals of the order Monotremes of Australia and New Guinea, whose

only living members are the Platypus and the echidnas.

"Ha-ha, how brilliant is that? I could have done with one of these when I was at school," he said. "We didn´t have anything like this when I was your age," said Donald, "we only had Dictionaries and a set of books that was called, 'Encyclopaedia Britannica'. They consisted of about twenty-one books, but only families what were well off could afford them. I used to go round my friend's house cos his dad had a set, and we could use them like you use your laptop, they were very different times then, they was. And another thing young Sam, we never had calculators either, we had what they called *slide rules*. My dad had one but I didn´t know how to use it. They used them for maths, they did. You kids today, you´ve got it made you have, got it made."

"Another thing I can do look, is type in *images slide rule*," She pointed to the return key.

Donald tapped it and pictures of slide rules came up. "Ha-ha, this is really good. That white one there looks like the one my dad had. It had a black case that was in two parts. This is the first time I´ve ever had a go on one of these computers, yer know. And what about you, young James. What have you been up to?"

James lit up and said, "Yesterday I wrote a list for my four friends, and sent them on a Treasure Hunt, like

you did for us and they all said that it was great fun and now we are going to do one every Saturday. It´s Michael's turn to do the list next week, and we´ve called ourselves, 'The Treasure Squad' and because it was my idea I am the Captain." James huffed on his fingernails and rubbed them on his chest whilst pulling an 'I´m so brilliant' face.

"Ha-ha, you clever boy," said Donald.

"Samantha is going to record all of our times and how many items we get each week and after four weeks we will see who comes top. Samantha said she will print out a certificate for the one what wins. I know that you said that the prize is the fun of doing the hunt, but my friends said that a certificate would be good because they can show it to their mums and dads and hang it up on the wall. I thought it would be good too."

"I agree with you," said Donald, "a certificate is a wonderful idea. Wish I had thought of it."

Jane and I were stood at the kitchen door watching James give his news and thoughts to Donald and we were both very proud of 'The Treasure Squads' Captain, and Samantha the new David Attenborough.

"Okay, everybody, to the table and sit down, dinner is served," announced Jane, in her best 'Head Mistress' voice.

We all took our seats and Jane put the dish in the centre of the table and then started to dish out, starting

with our guest first. Donald was right. It really smells lovely. When everyone had their plates, we all tucked in.

"Umm, this is lovely," said James.

"I like the crispy potato bit at the top with the oxo on, umm it´s really nice, well done Mum," said Samantha.

"We will certainly be having this again," I said.

Donald said, "It takes me back to Bedhampton when I was a lad, it does, it´s really good of you young Jane to go to all this trouble. Thank you very much."

"Your welcome," Jane said. She picked up her wine glass and said, "Here´s to Donald's Mum Maggie for her recipe."

We all raised our glasses and said, "Donald's Mum, Maggie"

Donald added, "Bless you, Mum."

We carried on eating and Donald said, "This is the first glass of wine I´ve had for about forty years, and it was well worth the wait, ha-ha, lovely food, a lovely drop of wine, and lovely people to enjoy both with."

"I feel another toast coming on," I said.

"You´re quite right young Jim," said Donald raising his glass, "Here´s to my friends, Jim, Jane, Samantha and James."

"Here´s to us all," I said, and we all toasted ourselves.

"And Donald," James said.

"And Donald," we all said, and we all of us started laughing. It really was a wonderful moment and certainly one we will never forget. Thoughts of my first meeting with Donald flashed through my mind and I really felt blessed that I had met and was helping this wonderful man get by.

"Who wants some more, there´s plenty left," said Jane, and we all had a second helping. The empty dish at the centre of the table had surrendered to this mighty army of Maggie's Corned Beef Hash Lovers. Ha-ha happy days.

We sat for a while sipping our drinks and chatting. Donald told Jane that the garden looks lovely and that it was so peaceful. Jane asked if anyone had room left for ice cream and, apparently, we all did. After lunch, we cleared the table and lifted it back inside. Samantha had taken lots of photographs for her journal and was showing them to everyone. I loaded everything into the dishwasher and then Donald, Jane and I sat in the reclining garden chairs enjoying the sun. After about half an hour, Jane made a pot of coffee and the kids asked Donald to tell them some more about when he was a lad.

"Well let me think," said Donald. He adjusted his lounger into a more upright position. Samantha and James sat in the plastic patio chairs. "Well," said Donald, "when I was a kid, long before we moved to the countryside, I lived in the city, Portsmouth it was,

but everyone called it Pompey. I must have been seven or eight, maybe, and me and my best mate, Roy, we went one day to a place called Portsdown Hill. It was a massive hill that overlooked the city and we had heard that there was chalk pits up there and people used to find fossils in the cliffs. So, we, being the world's greatest ever palaeontologist 'fossil hunters', decided that we would go and find loads of these fossils they talk about, sell em, and make loads of money. We takes my Dad's small hammers and some chisels in a duffle bag, jumps on our bikes and off we goes.

Took us ages to get there, it did, and when we sees the size of the cliffs, well, I mean, they was big. Anyway, my mate Roy says the fossils will be right at the top. He must be right, thinks I, cos he´s the one with the brains. So, we starts going up, but the chalk rocks are all loose and we keeps sliding back down every time we climbed a few feet. In the end, we started breaking up the small rocks at the bottom, but we never did find any fossils. My mum said we never were successful when we went off on our adventures.

It was the same when we went night fishing, it was to be the first night we would spend out on our own. We sets up all our fishing gear and casted out the lines, thinking that we would catch enough fish for tea when we get home the next day. After all, we was the world's greatest ever fishermen. After about two hours or so, we hadn´t caught anything so we decides to light

a fire and cook some nosh. We had taken with us my mum's frying pan, some eggs, bacon, and bread. So, Roy gets some big chalk rocks and arranges them into a circle, cos he´s the one with the brains. Then we collects loads of wood and lights a fire ready to do the cooking on. Now, the flames they was big and cos we knew no better we puts the fat in the pan and, when it´s hot, we puts in the bacon and boy it smelt great. We sat back, proud of ourselves for being the world's greatest ever chefs and waited for it to cook.

When the bacon was ready, we moves it to the side of the pan and breaks in the eggs. Now, at this point we really are drooling at the mouth and eager to get stuck into our supper. We butters four slices of bread, that´s two each, ready for our egg 'n' bacon sarnies, and me mum's frying pan starts melting and the handle comes off, but we did manage to save the food and we tucked into it like we was starving and not been fed for weeks.

Ha-ha, we, now, at this point had enough of fishing, cos we hadn´t caught anything, so we gives up on that and we starts to carve faces and heads in the chalk rocks we found, which was an obvious thing to do cos we was the world's best ever sculptors, we was.
We chatted and laughed our way through the whole night and made our way home at first light of dawn. My mum and Roy´s mum both laughed at us cos it was situation normal for us two, no fish, a melted frying pan and two carved heads made of chalk, ha-ha.

The thing is yer see, Sam and James, yer don´t have to be the world's best at anything or be a big success to have fun in your life. You don´t have to shy away from anything, yer don´t. You just have to realise that the real fun is in the taking part and being able to say we did that. Ha-ha, happy days they was."

"It´s like the treasure hunt," said James.

"That is spot on young man, spot on," said Donald.

"Did you ever do anything right, you and your friend Roy?" asked Samantha laughing.

"Yes! Of course we did," said Donald, doing his very best to look hurt and insulted. "We always got it right at being wrong, ha-ha."

Donald and the kids went into fits of laughter, and Jane and I joined in too.

The one thing I noticed about Donald when he was telling tales of his younger days, is that there was always a message to learn or a moral of some kind. He never ceases to amaze me. When I think back to our very first meeting and he told me that, 'You don´t know what you´ve got till it´s gone, young Jim'. And then he said, 'And don´t you forget that, young Jim'. Even now that twinkle in his eye is still ever present. Samantha and James certainly enjoy listening to him and the bonus, of course, is that they are learning so much from him.

"Well, what a wonderful afternoon it´s been," said Donald. "I can´t thank you enough."

“The day is not over yet,” said Jane. “You are here for tea as well. We intend to make a full day of it.”

“I´m really being spoiled today, I am,” said Donald.

“That´s what you are here for,” I said.

We had a lazy day in the garden and moved inside as the sun fell below the tree line. For tea, we had salad and a nice big slice of Jane´s chicken and ham pie she made the previous day, and for afters we had my favourite, apple crumble. Jane made up sandwiches and flasks for Donald and also a slice of the pie for him to take back with him. I changed the batteries in his radio and Jane gave Donald clean socks and underwear to pack in his backpack for the coming week.

As I dropped Donald off at Blake Street, it was getting dark and he thanked me for a truly wonderful day. I told him not to mention it, smiled and said that the invoice would be in the post.

“Good luck with that, young Jim,” he said, and we both laughed out loud.

“Good night, Donald,” I said. “I´ll see you on Wednesday. Take care my friend.”

As I got to the end of Blake Street, I checked the rear-view mirror and Donald was telling all and sundry about his wonderful day.

-: T :

Chapter Twenty

‘VIP´s and The Beatles’

When I got home, Jane had finished clearing everything away and the kids were settled in front of the telly watching one of the Indiana Jones films. I sat in my armchair and Jane brought me a nice cup of tea.

“Well, what a lovely day that was,” she said, “Donald certainly seemed to enjoy himself.”

“I liked the way he and his friend were the world’s greatest at everything,” James said giggling and Samantha thought Donald loved seeing what can be done with a computer.

The following morning, Donald was up early and off doing his rounds. He called into the shelter to tell Nurse Bishop all about his day out at our house and she was absolutely thrilled for him. He asked the kitchen staff if he could have some old bread because he had promised the pigeons that he would bring them some next time he was their way. Doris, the head cook gave Donald a loaf of sliced bread that was a few days old and said to give the pigeons her love.

“Ha-ha, I will do that, Doris,” he said with a grateful smile. On his way down to the park he was on the lookout for anyone wearing checked clothing and he hadn´t seen any by the time he got to the end of the

town. “Maybe checks aren’t in fashion these days,” he thought to himself as he went through the park gates.

He sat down on his favourite bench near the lake and separated the loaf into two so that he would have some left for the pigeons at the town square when he gets there later today. He started to break up one of the slices ready to throw, and the Mallards must have noticed because they came waddling up towards him. He threw them the first handful and watched as they started to feed. “This is what life´s all about,” he thought as he took out another slice. “Must save some for the swans, they´ll be over here soon,” he said to himself.

The park wasn´t as full today as it was the other day, so the squirrels were busy running up and down the tree trunks and along the ground to the next tree. The radio was playing songs from the sixties, the sun was shining, and Donald was in his element, “Ah! This is the life,” he said. He took his flask out of his backpack and poured himself a cup of tea, and then he sat sipping the tea and watching the squirrels and birds.

“Good morning,” said a young lady making her way to the lake with her toddler.

“And good morning to you too,” Donald said.

“We are going to feed the ducks, my littlun loves feeding them,” she said. “I´ve often seen you down here, it´s a lovely spot to come and relax. Are you from around here?” she asked.

“Well, I am local, but I´m homeless and I live on the streets, I do.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” she said.

“Don´t you worry young lady, I wouldn’t want it any other way” said Donald.

“My husband helps the homeless,” she said, with a warm and friendly smile. “He is the manager at the Stockheath Way Shelter. You can get help there whenever you need it, you know,” she said.

“I will bear that in mind, Mrs. Peters,” said Donald with a cheeky smile.

“How did you know… ah! Of course, you know Graham, don´t you?” she said.

“I do indeed,” said Donald, “and he is a very nice man, your Graham, a very nice man indeed.”

“ But you said you live on the streets.”

“Yes I do, but your Graham helped me out when I got assaulted and ended up in hospital. I has a lot of respect for Mr. Peters I do, a lot of respect.”

“You’re Donald,” she said with a beaming smile.

“I am indeed young lady, I am Donald James Kilbaine, and I am very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Peters.”

“Oh please, call me Kate, everyone does.”

“Only if you calls me Donald, and what is your little ones name?”

“This is Victor,” she told Donald. “Poor little thing, his middle name is Ian so he´ll be getting ribbed a lot

when he grows up with the initials VIP," she said laughing.

"Well, at least they won´t say he´s "Nuts" like his mum, ha-ha," said Donald laughing, KP nuts, ha-ha."

Kate started laughing too. Little Victor looked at his Mum and he started to giggle.

"And his dad is a doctor Ha-ha, GP," said Donald. "I´m sorry," Donald said, "I shouldn´t be making fun like this."

Kate was still laughing and said, "Yes, you should, fun is what is needed in life, if we can´t laugh at ourselves, who can we laugh at?"

When they both calmed down, Donald gave little Victor some of his bread to give to the ducks. "I called in at the shelter on my way here to get the bread so I can feed the ducks and then the pigeons at the town square later on," Donald told Kate.

"Graham said you were a very nice man," she said, "and he was obviously right."

After feeding the ducks, Donald told Kate about Jim and Jane, and how they have helped him out. He then told her about him going to lunch and what they had to eat. He told her about Samantha and James and realising that he was going on a bit, he said, "Sorry, I must be boring you."

"Not at all, Donald. It's been lovely chatting with you and meeting you. And what a coincidence it was meeting you like this," she said.

After feeding the ducks, Kate said goodbye and was sure that they would bump into each other again.

Donald sat for a while listening to his music and watching the birds. The swans had finally turned up with their signets and he fed them all, making sure that they each had a fair share. This was certainly ‘in his mind’ a wonderful way to pass the time.

It finally dawned on Donald that little Victor had a checked shirt on, and Kate was wearing small black and white check trousers, “That´s two,” he said to himself. “Ha-ha, nearly missed them.” He put the remainder of the bread in his backpack and made his way up to the town square.

As he turned into the square, he noticed that all of the benches were occupied, so he went over to the far side where there was a grassed area and sat down by the trees. As he sat down a few pigeons landed and Donald told them that he has kept his word. He started feeding them and told them that Doris from the shelter´s canteen sends her love and it´s her they should be thanking for the bread.

Looking around the square Donald noticed that there were a lot of people arriving, and at the clock tower end a group of people were setting up music stands and wooden benches. After a few minutes, more people started to file out from the town hall, about thirty in all, and they were taking up positions on the benches. “It´s some sort of concert,” Donald thought to

himself. The choir and musicians took a few moments to settle, and the master announced that it was in fact the towns very own choir and that he hoped we will enjoy the session. He told the crowd that tonight they will be performing five Beatles' songs. He turned around, raised his hands and the choir began to sing the song 'I want to hold your hand' and they sounded absolutely fantastic.

"Well, what a treat this is going to be," Donald said to himself and moved further down to get a better view. Everyone in the square was bouncing up and down to the music, some were up on their feet dancing and all were enjoying this jocund event. Donald was absolutely thrilled with everything that was going on and was overdosing on his people watching. So many people in one place enjoying and sharing this wonderful moment, he thought to himself as the choir and the audience started singing, "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah," and Donald joined in too.

Donald was amazed at the way different members of the choir were singing different parts of the song, and then they would all join in. "You think you've lost your love, well I saw her yes ter dayay, ha-ha." Donald was really enjoying himself at this unexpected concert. "They are singing all the songs I knows the words to," he thought.

It was like thunder when everyone applauded at the end of each song and when the choir began their last

song everyone was up on their feet and singing along. ‘All you need is love’ it was a beautiful moment watching a hundred odd strangers singing along, and it actually brought a tear to Donald’s eye. When the concert came to its end, the choir master thanked the audience and the choir received a thunderous round of applause from everyone in the square. Donald, too, was on his feet clapping for all he was worth. It was probably the first time he felt part of something in a very long time.

Donald sat under the trees and watched as the crowd slowly dwindled, all of them chatting to each other about what a wonderful choir and concert it was. Quite a few people, as they passed, smiled and said goodnight to Donald even though they did not know him.

“Goodnight,” Donald said to them all, smiling, and he waved to them as they passed.

The fact that he may have missed a lot of people wearing checked clothing didn´t seem to bother him. After all, this week he had been out for a meal and a concert. “Ha-ha, happy days,” he thought as he left the square and made his way up to Blake Street.

When Donald arrived in Blake Street, he noticed that boards had been erected saying that the buildings were to be demolished and a new office block was to be built. The demolition of the existing buildings was to commence sometime in the new year. Donald felt as

though another important part of his life was coming to an end. After being on such a high for the past few days, Donald, all of a sudden, was feeling depressed, and a wave of sadness seemed to engulf him. He sat down on the top step of his doorway, took off his backpack and thought to himself, “What do I do now?”

He sat quiet for a while, not even telling his belongings what a fantastic day he had had. And then, after a few minutes had passed, he said to himself, “Yer stupid old fool, I´ll just go and find another doorway somewhere, easy as that it is, easy as that.” He looked up and down the length of Blake Street and couldn´t help but think that it will be a wrench to leave, but if he has to leave, then leave he must. “Anyway, they won´t be starting till next year,” he told himself, so there´s plenty of time to find a new place to stay.

It was really lovely meeting Kate and young Victor at the park, and then that wonderful concert in the square, he thought. It really has been a marvellous time these last few days. Think I´ll have a nice long walk down by the old bridge tomorrow, then I can walk back along the canal to the lock, give meself time to think, it will. “Yeah, that´s what I´ll do, a nice long walk and a think,” he told his belongings, as he turned on his radio to listen to some music while waiting for the Salvation Army van to turn up with some soup and tea.

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Chapter Twenty-One

‘Blakey’

“You´ll never believe who I met at the park today,” Kate said to Graham when he got home from the shelter.

“Go on then, who?” he said.

“Well, there is an old man I see down by the lake most days and this morning I said good morning to him, and it only turns out to be Donald, the old guy you told me about, and what a lovely man he is.”

“Well, what are the odds of that,” he said, “he´s a great hit with everyone at the shelter but he refuses to stay permanently. He prefers being out there on his own with his thoughts. He does come in once a month, though, to see Nurse Bishop for his feet, and while he is there he has a shower and a hot meal before going back out on the street. Yeah, a really nice old man, he is.”

Donald set off on his walk down to the old bridge, he was in no hurry to get there and decided to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of the countryside. It was a beautiful sunny morning, all the hedgerow birds seemed to be noisier than normal and he stopped every now and again to listen to them and try to spot them.

When he got down to the old bridge, he took the path that led down from the side of the bridge to the canal. Apart from two anglers set up on the opposite bank, all was quiet. Donald found a spot where he could sit and enjoy the peace. He put his ear plugs in and tuned his radio to a classical music station, closed his eyes, and with the warm sunshine on his face, drifted away from the reality of the pending Blake Street demolition.

Donald must have been asleep for two hours or so and was awakened by something pulling at his trouser leg. When he looked down there was a scruffy little dog looking up at him. "And what are you up too young feller?" Donald asked the little dog. The scruffy little feller just tilted his head to one side and kept looking up at Donald. After a few seconds he inched his way forward, so he was level with Donald's knee. "Hungry are you, littlun?" said Donald reaching for his backpack. "All I´ve got is some bread that was meant for the birds," he told the little dog, and then offered some to him. The dog ate speedily and then sat looking up for more once he had finished. "Oh, you are a hungry chap," Donald said, and gave him some more. When littlun had finished, he sat by Donald's side and laid his head in Donald´s lap. "Well, it looks like I´ve got meself a new friend." Donald checked to see if the dog had a tattoo in his ears as he did not have a collar on, but there was nothing to say he belonged to

someone else. He then told the little dog that his name was Donald and that he was pleased to meet him. He told the dog that he had no home to take him to but lived in a doorway in Blake Street. “Ah! Blake Street, Blakey, that´s what I´ll call you, Blakey. How d´yer fancy that for a name.” Blakey looked up at Donald and gave a little bark. “That´s settled then, Blakey it is.”

Donald got to his feet, put on his backpack, and set off down the canal path, Blakey followed at Donald’s side. As they walked along Donald kept looking down at Blakey, and Blakey kept looking up at Donald. “Ha-ha, a match made in heaven we are,” Donald told Blakey, “a match made in heaven.”

Donald knew that he had to get a proper dog’s meal for his newfound friend, so he decided to get Graham at the shelter to phone me for help. When Graham phoned me and told me the story of Blakey, I asked him to give Donald five pounds to get a tin of dog food and a lead for the dog and I would call in this evening and pay him back the money.

Graham gave Donald the money, telling him what I had said, and then got Doris to fetch a bowl of food from the kitchen, as Blakey looked as though he needed feeding up. Graham found a dog’s lead and collar in the storeroom that someone had left ages ago and gave them to Donald.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Peters,” said Donald.

Doris filled Donald´s flask with tea, patted Blakey on the head and gave him a biscuit. His little tail wagged so much he nearly threw himself over.

"Here, put these in your pocket for later," said Doris giving Donald a nearly full packet of biscuits.

"You are an angel, Doris, thank you very much."

"You are both welcome," she said.

Graham said that he would speak to a friend of his who works for an animal charity and see if he can arrange for a vet to check Blakey over for him. He´ll let him know in due course. "I have to point out, Donald, that if you call in for a meal anytime, you will have to come around to the back because of hygiene rules. Blakey won´t be allowed into the dining area, you understand?"

"Yes sir, I fully understand and thank you for everything."

Graham told Donald how happy his wife was to meet him yesterday and how they both laughed last night about the KP Nuts and the GP.

Donald laughed and said that it was because he was in the presence of a 'Very Important Person' and the occasion went to his head.

They both laughed and Graham told Doris that he would explain the joke later.

Donald and Blakey left the shelter and made their way down to the park. Donald was pleased with the way Blakey behaved on the lead and it would appear

that Blakey was pleased with the way Donald had become his new owner. A match made in heaven, thought Blakey, then a wagging tail and an old man with a spring in his step made their merry way down through the town. The worry of the 'Blake Street Demolition' and finding a new place to stay at night could not have been further from Donald´s mind, as he was telling Blakey that they were on their way to feed the ducks.

I arrived at Blake Street at about ten o'clock and Donald was sat in his doorway, laid next to him but close to him was Donald's new pal, Blakey. I must admit he was a lovely looking little chap indeed. "Hi Donald," I said.

"Hello Jim, this is my new companion Blakey."

The little dog's tail was going like the clappers, so I rubbed his head and told him what a lovely little lad he was. Donald thanked me for helping him out when Graham called me earlier. I told him not to worry about it. "I´ve brought some things for you, Donald," I said. "There are two plastic bowls, one for food and one for water. There are a few tins of dog meat and a packet of dog biscuits. I´ve also brought a bottle of water so you can give him a drink now." Donald poured some water into one of the bowls and Blakey drank it all and then looked for more, so Donald gave him more. He drank that and then curled up next to Donald looking

contented with himself. “You must make sure that he always has water,” I told Donald.

“I will, young Jim, I promise you, he will want for nuffin.”

Donald told me how he woke up and found Blakey at his side. He told me about meeting Kate and the concert in the square and then about the demolition of Blake Street next year. “You´ve had a busy time,” Donald, I said. “Jane and the kids want to come down at the weekend to meet this little chap if it´s okay with you.”

“That would be lovely, young Jim,” Donald said.

“What about we meet you at the park by the lake?” I suggested.

“Yes, that´ll be great and then Sam and James will be able to play with Blakey,” he said.

Donald asked me if I needed the five pounds back. “No, you keep it Donald,” I told him. Donald said he wanted to use it to get a brush so he could give Blakey a good brushing and untangle some of his hair, if that´s okay. “You use it for whatever you wish,” I told him. All this time, little Blakey was looking from Donald to me and from me to Donald as if he knew what we were talking about. He had the loveliest eyes and that little dog look that could melt the hardest of hearts.

“Right, I´ll say goodnight then, Donald, and we´ll meet you at the lake on Sunday at about twelve o’clock. We´ll bring lunch with us and some goodies

for this little lad," I said giving Blakey´s head a good rub.

"Thank you, young Jim, for everything," said Donald. "Give my love to Jane and the kids and tell them that we´re looking forward to seeing them on Sunday," he added.

"Will do," I said. I made my way to the car and drove home. I knew that Donald would be in his doorway telling Blakey all about us and how we met. He´d tell him, too, about Jane, Samantha, and James, and I´m sure that little Blakey will be hanging on his every word.

-: T :-

Chapter Twenty-Two

‘Lakeside Fetch’

“I needs a brush for Blakey,” Donald told the young girl at the pet shop.

“Certainly, sir,” she said and showed Donald where they were.

“I´ll take this one,” he said, “cos it also has a metal comb comes with it, and I´ll be able to get all the tangles out of his hair.”

“Just go careful with the comb, you don´t want to hurt him by tugging too hard,” the girl said.

Donald gave the girl the five-pound note. The brush and comb set cost four pounds and twenty pence so Donald asked if she had any treats he could get with the change.

She gave Donald a bag of doggie treats that cost a pound and let him off the extra, saying, “We´ll call it his birthday present.”

“Thank you very much, young lady, that´s very kind of you,” said Donald as he left the store. “There´s a lot of kind people in this world young Blakey,” he said, as they walked back towards Blake Street for a long overdue grooming session.

Donald spent quite a while brushing Blakey´s hair and only used the comb when he came to a tangled

part. He carefully got all the tangled hair cleared and Blakey´s coat was looking so much better. “We´ll do this every day young man so we keeps you in good shape”. When he finished the grooming, he gave Blakey a couple of his treats telling him he was a good boy. “You can´t have them all in one go cos we needs to save some for other days,” he explained. “And don´t try the old doggie eyes,” he said, “cos they ain’t going to work on me.” Donald gave Blakey one more treat saying, “Okay, they do work on me, ha-ha.” Donald gave Blakey a bowl of water and about a quarter of a tin of food. It was head down and tail going like the clappers as he gobbled it up in seconds. “C´mon then Blakey, let´s go for a walk. We´ll go down by the canal again today and walk the tow path all the way down to the lock and back, how´s that suit yer?” Donald looked at Blakey, Blakey looked at Donald, and they both thought at the same time that they were a match made in heaven. “Ha-ha, happy days,” said Donald.

When they got back to Blake Street there was a note pinned to the door in Donald’s doorway. Donald took it off and it was from Daniel at the shelter asking Donald to call in today as Graham had arranged for Blakey to get checked over by the vet at the animal charity centre.

“Ha-ha, MOT for you, me lad, so it´s just as well you had a good brushing this morning,” he told Blakey.

Donald and Blakey made their way to the shelter and Graham told Donald that the vet at the animal charity centre in Tangmere Avenue will see Blakey at five-fifteen this afternoon and that there will be nothing to pay. Donald was over the moon and thanked Graham for taking the time to arrange the appointment.

"Don´t you worry about that, just make sure you don´t get there late," said Graham.

When they got to the Animal Charity Centre, the lady at the reception desk told Donald to take a seat and that the vet will be out soon. After about ten minutes, the vet came out and called Blakey´s name,

"Please come through," he asked Donald. In the surgery, the vet asked Donald to lift Blakey up onto the stainless-steel table. He then ran a thing that looked like a remote over Blakey. "This is to see if he has an ownership chip," said the vet. "No, there´s no chip so it looks like he is now yours."

The vet then listened to Blakey´s heart, checked his mouth and teeth, checked his whole body and stomach, checked his eyes, and then said that everything seems to be okay. "I will give you a worming tablet to give him later, but I´ll now give him all of the required inoculations he needs. After he was finished, he gave Donald a booklet with Blakey´s details and record of the injections he had given him. "You must bring this

with you when you come again, we have been given Mr. Fraser´s contact details and we´ll contact him when Blakey needs his booster jabs."

All through the examination Blakey behaved perfectly, the vet rubbed his head, told him he was a good boy and gave him a doggie treat. Donald said that he´ll love coming here if he gets a treat every time. He thanked the vet and the lady at the desk on his way out and told Blakey that he was a clever and a well-behaved young man.

On the Sunday morning, Donald arrived at the park at eleven-thirty and walked down to the far end where the lake is. Me, Jane, and the kids were already there and occupying one of the benches.

"Good morning one and all," he called out, and we all said, "Good morning," back.

James and Samantha went straight to Blakey and made a fuss of him, "We´ve got you a ball to play with," said Samantha.

"Will he bring it back if we throw it?" asked James.

"Well, there´s only one way to find out," said Donald. He removed his lead and said sit. Blakey sat and stayed.

"I think he´s been taught this by someone before," said Jane.

Samantha threw the ball and said, "Go and fetch it, Blakey," and Blakey shot off and got the ball in his

mouth in one go and then raced back and dropped it at Samantha´s feet.

"Yep, he´s certainly played this game before," said Jane.

"Where was it you said you found him?" I asked Donald.

"It was down by the canal, just down from the old bridge, it was."

"Well, he must have been someone's dog before because he is so well behaved, and he has been trained to fetch," Jane explained.

Donald´s faced dropped. He was obviously considering having to give Blakey back to his real owner at some point in time.

Blakey and the kids were having the time of their lives playing with the ball. Every few seconds Blakey would stop and watch the ducks on the lake, probably thinking they'd be fun to play with.

Donald said, "Do you think I should report to the Police that I've found him? The vet checked and said that he didn´t have a chip thing in him."

"I think you should, Donald," said Jane. "Maybe he was owned by children, and they could be missing him.

"S´pose you're right," said Donald. "I can go to the Police with you if you want. They may need a contact number if he has been or is reported missing," I said.

"Yes, thank you young Jim, that would be for best," said Donald. His mood had certainly changed.

“He may have come from one of the boats that go up and down the canal,” Jane said, “and if that is the case we may never find out who his owner was.”

“I think it may be best if we photograph Blakey, print off a photo and have it put up on the post office notice board with a note saying something like, if you have lost this dog please contact this number. I´ll put my number and then we just wait and see if anyone contacts us,” I said, “that way he won´t be taken from you by the Police and put in the dog compound.”

“Yes, that´s the best idea, we´ll do that,” said Donald. “I don´t like the idea of him going into a compound cos they might put him down, and I don´t want that. He´s such a lively young fellow and I think he likes being with me.” Donald was getting quite upset at the thought, but we reassured him that a photo at the post office was the way to go, and that we will not let anything bad happen to Blakey.

Donald cheered up and started to tell us that he had bought a brush and comb set from the pet shop on the corner of Brown Street and given Blakey a good grooming. He said that he had taken him to the vet’s, and he had his injections and that he´s got his own book with it all recorded in. Donald took the book out and showed it to us like a proud parent showing off his child’s trophy. “There´s no way he can lose Blakey now,” I thought to myself, “it would break his heart.”

“Stay away from the water,” Jane called out to the kids.

“We don´t want Blakey going in after the ball, come up here and play,” I told them.

Donald was watching the three of them play and was laughing when Blakey jumped into the air to catch the ball. “They really do seem to be having fun,” said Donald.

“Well, we´ve got ham sandwiches, sausage rolls, pork pies, and crisps. Tea or coffee and cake for afters.”

“That sounds delicious,” said Donald. “I will share my pie with Blakey.”

“No need,” said Jane., “I´ve got him a nice tin of turkey chunks in gravy and some small dog biscuits to mix in with it.”

“Oh, he´ll love that,” said Donald. His mood had certainly lifted a few notches. “Blakey, here boy,” Donald called out slapping his leg, and the little guy ran back faster than Forrest Gump in the movie.

As he got to Donald, he went and sat by his side looking up at him. Both Jane and I thought at the same time, “It´s a match made in heaven.”

Samantha and James finally came back puffing and panting and very red of face.

“Sit down and rest now before we have lunch you´re getting too hot the pair of you.”

“We´ve been playing fetch with Blakey,” said James and he is really speedy.

Donald poured some water into a bowl and Blakey drank with it splashing everywhere. James and Samantha giggled at the sight thinking it was hilarious. Jane handed out the sandwiches and drinks and gave Blakey his turkey dinner and then we all tucked into our lakeside picnic with the customary mms and ahs. Samantha was saving all of her crusts to give to the ducks later, so we all joined her to make sure there was enough.

The afternoon was spent feeding the ducks and the swans and playing fetch with Blakey who was enjoying his new life with Donald and his friends. Samantha took a lot of photos of Donald with Blakey, James with Blakey, Jane with Blakey, Me with Blakey. Jane had to take some of Samantha with Blakey and then some of Blakey on his own for the post office notice board. She then asked a couple who were passing by if they would take one of us all, with Blakey of cause.

When we got home I printed one of the photos of Blakey on to a poster we had produced on the computer ready for Jane to take to the post office in the morning. Part of me was not wanting to do it, but inside I knew it was the right to do. It didn´t stop me hoping that no one comes forward to claim him though.

The poster stayed up on the notice board at the post office for two months and no one contacted us to claim Blakey as their lost pet, so we took the poster down and declared that Blakey is now the proud owner of one Donald James Kilbaine.

Jane had got a new collar and lead for Blakey with a name disk attached bearing his name and our contact details should he ever get lost.

Over the next few months, Blakey became one of the family, as Donald had done, and he certainly brought fun into Donald's life. Every night before sleep Donald would tell his thoughts to Blakey, and Blakey would listen to his every word, after all, that´s what faithful dogs do, is it not!

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Chapter Twenty-Three

‘The Pumping Station and Changes’

Over the next two years, Donald’s life fell into a routine of monthly visits to the shelter for his pedicure, daily walks along the canal, afternoons in the park, tea in the evenings with The Salvation Army, two-monthly haircut and beard trim, meals at the shelter, Wednesday night chats with me and fortnightly meals with Jane, me, and the kids.

The old buildings at Blake Street had been razed to the ground and a new two-story office block had been built in their place. ‘Blake House’ the new office block does, however, lack the character of the older buildings it replaced, and it´s totally changed the appearance of the area.

Donald had found and moved to the doorway of an old disused Victorian pumping station not too far from where his doorway in Blake Street was. The added bonus, as Donald would say it that there is a pathway that leads from the rear of it all the way down to the park avoiding the main roads through the town.

Life in the shelter had also changed. Nurse Bishop had moved away from the area and her replacement was a young nurse who insisted on being called Rachell and not Nurse Parker as Donald always called

her. It´s only out of respect for your position, Donald would say, but being full of fun, she would threaten to soak his feet in freezing water and cut his toenails with an angle grinder if he didn´t comply. He complied.

The other main change at the centre was the promotion and now the full-time employment of the new deputy manager, Daniel Johnson who, being true to his word, kept his promise to Donald and Graham that he would turn his life around and do all he could to help the homeless.

Doris was still in charge of the kitchen and the sly sneaking of treats to Blakey whenever Donald called in for his pedicure, or to get a meal.

In two days' time, Samantha will become a teenager, and Donald and Blakey are invited to her birthday party being held in the house. Donald has asked Jane for a copy of the photo of himself, Blakey and Samantha be sent to Daniel´s computer and no questions asked. Jane guessed why and sent it attached to an email to Daniel. Daniel printed the photo and had it mounted in a frame for Donald to give to Samantha as a birthday present.

James had devoted his time when he was with Donald to teaching Blakey to shake hands, heel, and to roll over. After all, he would say giggling, he was 'The World's Greatest Animal Trainer' just like Donald and his best mate Roy would say when they were kids.

Graham and Kate now have another son that they named Colin. His middle name was Oscar, so all the jokes about there being a Cop in the family obviously done the rounds. When Donald was told, he just said "I´m saying nuffin," with a big grin on his face.

David Stevens, the young army lad Donald met a few years ago at the shelter, is now working at a service station on the outskirts of town and is renting a flat in the old town. He pops into the shelter sometimes and helps out serving the meals, "cos appen I owes em," he says in his somewhere up north talk.

Yes, there´s been a lot of changes over the last few years, Donald, and we, as a family, have grown ever closer and every day we feel blessed for having had the chance to meet him. Every Wednesday evening, when I go to see him he still says, "Hey, Buddy, can yer spare a pound?" but it´s the chats we have that have changed. We chat as though we´ve known each other all our lives, and there is nothing he holds back on now. The doorway of the old pumping station is similar to the one in Blake Street, inasmuch as there are three steps and side walls that keep out the wind and rain. I have asked him on many occasions over the years, especially during the winter months, if he would move into the shelter permanently, but I´m always met with the same reply. "I likes to be with my own thoughts," he´d say and as much as it hurts, I have to respect my friend's wishes. I still take him his flasks of

tea and soup, and his bottle of ‘Central Heating Rum’ of course, “I Just have a few drops in me tea at night,” he says with that Kilbaine twinkle in his eyes.

I found out during one of our chats that Donald was twenty-two years old when his daughter Jane was born. I already knew that she was ten when the fire took them all, and during one of our Wednesday evening chats, Donald said the fire was in nineteen-seventy-seven, so that made Donald seventy-five years old. That means he was born in nineteen-forty-five. So from the fire to today, Donald has lived rough on the streets for all of forty-three years. That is a very long time indeed to be living rough on the streets! The horrific circumstances that led to him being homeless do not bear thinking about. The mental pain he must have suffered in every step he took in all weathers during those forty-three years… Well! In his own words, “It just rips yer soul from yer body.”

Blakey has made such a big difference to Donald’s life. He´s given him someone to look after and care for, a loyal and faithful friend who is with him twenty-four-seven, come rain or shine.

The biggest change, and to me the most worrying, is that Donald´s breathing is getting more laboured than it´s ever been and his walking pace has started to slow. I´ve suggested that he see a doctor, but he tells me he feels fine and well. I do, however, find myself keeping

a closer eye on him now that we are well into the winter months.

On the morning of Samantha´s birthday, because it was a Saturday, Jane had decided that she and Samantha would go into town together and do some serious clothes shopping. Samantha wanted a new winter coat and a pair of boots, but they had to be the latest fashion.

Jane and I have already got her main present, an MP 3 player and Bluetooth ear buds, but she has no idea that we have them, so they will be a lovely surprise.

James, who is 'The world's Greatest Secret Keeper' so he tells us, will give her a redeem voucher to download an album of her choice. He is really proud of his present because he saved up his pocket money for ages to pay for it.

Her party will be held tomorrow afternoon and she has three friends from school coming, and also Donald and Blakey, of course. Samantha said she did not want a big disco type party with lots of people and school friends at a hired venue as we suggested, she wants it very low key and with just her closest friends. She says she will enjoy it more that way.

Rachell from the shelter had brought in some Girlie type wrapping paper and wrapped up Donald´s framed photo for him to give to Samantha at her party.

He had come in and had a shower, changed his clothes, and collected the photo. "Thank you for doing

this for me," he said to Rachell. "It looks like a proper gift now."

"It´s a lovely, thoughtful gift, Donald, and I´m sure Samantha will love it," said Rachell. "You just have a lovely time and wish her happy birthday from all of us here," she said.

"I will certainly do that Nurse Parker… **Rachell !**" he said quickly, winking at her in fun.

She raised her arm threatening a back hander and they both laughed, "Goodnight Donald," she said smiling.

"Big day tomorrow young Blakey, we are going to Sam´s birthday party, and there will be cake."
Blakey looked up at Donald when he heard the word cake and took up his position alongside Donald's sleeping bag ready for a night's kip.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

‘Birthdays and Ten Below’

When Donald woke everywhere was white with frost, Blakey was under his fleece blanket snuggled up close to Donald. As always, Blakey got up first and went off to the far side of the area by the bushes to do his business and by time he got back, Donald had his bowl of food ready for him. Donald had the last of his tea from the flask and started to pack his sleeping bag away. “It was a cold night last night young Blakey, best get ourselves out and about, get the old bones moving,” he said, and off they went.

They took the path at the rear of the pumping station and made their way down to the park. The lake was frozen solid and the whole park was white. “It is certainly a beautiful sight,” Donald said as he stood there taking in the scene. He let Blakey off his lead and watched as Blakey went running around him in circles. After ten minutes, Donald walked up towards the park gates and waited for Blakey to come to him. He put his lead back on because they are now going to the burger van for a bacon sandwich and a cup of tea. I always made sure that Donald had money on him at all times for food, both for him and Blakey. I couldn´t bear the thought of them going hungry.

“Good morning, Donald,” said Brian, the burger van owner. “What can I get you?”

“I´ll have a cup of tea and a bacon, no… not bacon, make that a sausage sandwich, and I´ll have an extra sausage for Blakey, please Brian.”

“Coming up, Donald, here´s yer tea, sandwich is on its way. A bit cold last night, Donald, how d’ya cope?” asked Brian whilst he was preparing Donald´s sandwich.

“No problem, we´re used to it we are, we´re always well wrapped up and we´ve got all the right gear, we have, all the right gear.”

“One sausage sandwich and one sausage for Blakey, I´d let that cool a bit before you give it to him,” said Brian.

Blakey´s nose went into overdrive and he gave a small whine to let Donald know that he too wants, and needs, and can´t live without a sausage, pretty please doggie eyes looking up at him.

After their breakfast, Donald thanked Brian and said he´d see him again soon. He and Blakey made their way up through town to the Animal Charity Centre, it was time for Blakey to have another one of his jabs. Blakey didn´t seem to mind going for his jabs, it probably had something to do with the doggie treats he gets for being ‘such a good boy’.

I picked Donald and Blakey up at the shelter at twelve o'clock and took them back for Samantha´s party.

When Donald came through, he said, "Happy birthday Sam," and gave her his present.

Samantha smiled a big 'It´s my birthday today' smile and said, "Thank you, that´s very nice of you, Donald."

"It´s from Blakey as well," Donald told her.

Samantha crouched down and rubbed Blakey´s head saying, "And thank you too, Blakey." Samantha opened her present and her face lit up, "It´s lovely Donald, thank you."

Donald had written on the bottom of the photo, 'Happy birthday, Sam' from Donald and Blakey and added two kisses.

"It really is a lovely gift," said Jane, and Samantha said she will keep it on her dressing table to remind her of her two 'bestest' friends.

Sam then showed Donald her new MP3 Player and after explaining what it is and does, Donald was absolutely astounded at how many songs it could hold.

"It was records in my day," said Donald, "And you wouldn´t be able to get eight thousand records into that little thing, ha-ha. Things have certainly moved on they have."

"Have you had anything to eat, Donald?" I asked him.

“Yes, I had a sausage sandwich at Brian´s and Blakey had a sausage too.”

“Cup of tea?”

“Love one,” said Donald.

“Sit down and I´ll bring it through.”

The doorbell rang and Samantha said, “I´ll go, it´ll be my friends.” She rushed to the door and it was indeed her three friends. She let them in and hung up their coats.

“It´s nice and warm in here,” said Jenny, the tall girl with the dark hair, “It´s absolutely freezing out there.”

Samantha brought them through to the lounge to meet Donald and Blakey. “Donald, this is Jenny, Carol and Susan,” she said, and they all said Hi.

“We have heard all about you and Blakey,” said Carol as she dropped down to the floor rubbing and playing with Blakey, “and I´ve been longing to meet this little chap,” she said.

Blakey was loving the attention but couldn´t understand why she had not given him any doggie treats. “I can see he likes you,” said Donald. “Do you have a dog at home?”

“Yes,” she said, “I´ve got a poodle, but he´s Mum´s dog really. We all love him though.”

Jane came through from the kitchen and said, “Hi girls, how are we all?”

“We´re fine,” they said, and Susan thanked Jane for inviting them.

“Well, we couldn´t have a party without Samantha´s best friends, could we?”

I brought Donald´s tea through and asked the girls what they would like, and they all said Coke, please. “Three Cokes coming up,” I said, and carried on with my waiter duties.

“Better take some crisp in for them while you´re doing the drinks, then we can start setting up the table in the dining room,” said Jane.

When the table was set, we all made our way through and Blakey was first there. He sat at the side of Donald´s chair and was very well behaved. He probably knew he´d get nothing if he played up.

The menu was as Samantha and her friends requested, pizza and buckets of KFC with Ben and Jerry´s ice cream tubs for afters. Not wanting to leave Blakey out of the proceedings, Jane gave him his own bowl of KFC cut up with a few of his dog biscuits. During the meal, the girls gave Samantha her presents but told her she can´t open them until the cake comes in and she´s blown out the candles.

Donald said, “This is a wonderful way to celebrate a birthday,” and everyone agreed as they tucked into the food. James was sat next to Donald and was feeding bits of pizza to Blakey when he thought no one was watching. We all saw him but chose to let it go working on the principle that if we´re have fun, then so should Blakey.

When the buckets and tubs, and pizza boxes were all empty, Jane brought in the cake, with thirteen candles all lit, and placed it on the table in front of Samantha.

"They have to be blown out in one go remember," I said. Samantha took in a deep breath and blew out all the candles in one go, and then we all sang Happy Birthday to You.

Samantha opened her presents and said thank you to Susan, Carol, and Jenny for the lovely gifts. Susan had given her a DVD of Ed Sheeran in concert, and Carol gave her a T-shirt with a picture of Ed Sheeran on the front, and Jenny gave her framed print of Thierry Henry from the online Arsenal store. She had already got her presents from Jane, me, James and Donald and she said that she couldn´t want for more.

Samantha took lots of photos for her journal and said she would forward them to everyone next week.

"What were your birthday´s like Donald?" asked Carol.

"Well, we never had things like you kids have today," said Donald. "We used to get things like Meccano sets, cowboy guns that had caps, ha-ha, when you pulled the trigger they made a loud bang, and we had plastic Air fix models that you had to glue together. I didn´t have the patience for them, I was always wanting to get out and play, I was never a stay

indoors lad. I remember that all the ladies, mothers, grandmothers, aunties, they all used to do knitting, they did. We never had many clothes that were bought for us on our birthdays. Our jumpers would be knitted, with or without sleeves, scarfs, cardigans, gloves, balaclavas, we´d get things like that for birthdays. I once got a bow and arrow set and the arrows had rubber suckers on the ends, and we all used to go around playing cowboys and Indians.

Like I was telling Sam, we never had TVs, and there was nuffin like KFC buckets, we´d have 'Two penneth' of chips with loads of salt and vinegar wrapped up in newspaper, we did, and we would only have fish with our chips when my dad could afford it. Sometimes my mum used to make toffee apples as a special treat, ha-ha, no Ben and Jerry´s in those days, there weren't.

And our birthday cakes was always a sponge made by Mum, the candles were normally little cos they were saved and used for the next birthday, and then the next, and the next, and so on. You young ladies are what, thirteen? Well, when I was thirteen, we got our first telly, it was about ten inches square."

"That´s about twenty-five centimetres," said Jane.

"I don´t know about that, but it was a black and white picture. On the rare occasion that we went to the pictures the films were in black and white too, we thought it was great though, because we knew nuffin

else, yer see. We were happy and contented with what we did have though. Ha-ha, it´s all a lot different now, it is."

After tea, the girls went through to the lounge, and chatted and giggled as young girls do these days, and they were playing their favourite videos on You Tube. At seven o'clock, Jenny´s dad turned up to take the girls home, and after all the goodbyes and thankyous, the house seemed really quiet. Blakey was sleeping under the table and I don´t think World War three would have woken him.

"Well, how do you think it went?" asked Jane, and Samantha said it was absolutely perfect, 'Perfect' as Ed Sheeran would say. She told Donald that he was her favourite singer.

I took Donald back to the pump house armed with flasks and sandwiches. He thanked me for a truly wonderful time and said that he felt honoured to have been invited.

It´s going to be another cold one tonight so make sure you keep wrapped up warm I told him. "If it gets too bad you get to the shelter."

"I will, don´t worry," he said.

"I do worry though," I told him, "I´ll see you on Wednesday evening as usual, Donald. Take care, my friend."

"Tell Jane and Samantha thank you for me," he said. "I had a lovely time I did, a lovely time".

When I got home, Jane said that on the news they said that they are expecting temperatures to drop down to about minus ten degrees tonight.

"I hope Donald will be okay," she said.

"I´ve told him to go to the shelter if it gets too bad and he promised me that he would.

The previous week I had given Donald one of those rubber bed rolls that was insulated on one side. In his doorway Donald rolled it out onto the cardboard he had and then his sleeping bag inside the survival bag. He laid them alongside the actual door out of the wind. Blakey was alongside Donald in the fleece blanket, and they would keep each other warm. All zipped up and wrapped up ready for the long cold night, Donald said goodnight to Blakey and pulled him on top of the sleeping bag to make sure he stayed warm.

"Well, it´s been a lovely day again," he told Blakey. "Sam really liked her present." He pulled on his fleece balaclava and the hood of the sleeping bag and told Blakey to sleep tight and don´t let the bed bugs bite.

When day light came, Donald woke and thought that it was too cold to get up just yet, and for the first time in his forty-three years on the streets he decided to have a lie in. Blakey made a quick dash to do his ablutions and was back on the sleeping bag and under his fleece blanket. He wriggled and worked his way between Donald legs, and he was not moving for anyone. "Ha-ha, you ain't stupid, are you boy?" said

Donald, “We´ll get up later when the sun comes out, deal?” If dogs could talk, Blakey would have spit on his paw and shook hands with Donald saying it´s a deal, boss.

Donald fell asleep and slept for about four hours, he was woken by Blakey whining to be fed. “You hungry, boy,” he said, sitting up and getting Blakey´s food ready. While Blakey was eating, Donald poured himself a cup of coffee and ate two of his sandwiches. After breakfast, they both felt a bit livelier and the cold was easier to handle.

“We´ll go for a nice walk today, Blakey, Oh, maybe not. Your little feet are freezing, come here, I´ll give em a rub and warm em up. Donald rubbed Blakey’s feet and wrapped him up closer in his blanket.
“I´ll tell yer sommint, young Blakey, that KFC at the party was really tasty, I thoroughly enjoyed it, I did, and you gobbled yours up quick enough. We´ll stay where we are for now and wait till it warms up a bit before we goes anywhere,” Donald said. His sleeping bag was almost solid with the frost and he knew that when it warms slightly it will end up damp. “And that´s the last thing we want,” he told Blakey. “I think we shall have to go the shelter when it warms a bit and see if they can dry it out for us. If not, I may have to stay at the centre. I dunno where they´ll let you stay though. No, we´ll be okay. We´ll rough it, we´ll be fine I´m sure.”

The sun did come out, but it had no effect on warming things up, and because the days were shorter now the darkness was again on its way. Because Donald was hot in his sleeping bag last night his clothes now felt damp, as did the sleeping bag. As the coldness took hold and the temperature dropped, Donald really felt the cold and was starting to shiver. He and Blakey were well wrapped up, but it was the dampness freezing that was the problem. It was going to be a very long, cold and uncomfortable night.

On the Wednesday evening, I left work early and drove down to see Donald. I had with me flasks of stew and hot drinks, tea, and coffee, and I also took an extra fleece blanket for Blakey.

As I approached the doorway of the pump house, I could see that Donald was wrapped up but was not moving. I thought my heart was going to stop. Blakey came out from under the blanket and ran up to me barking and whining and then ran back to where Donald was, nudging him with his nose and looking up at me for help. Donald had passed away in the cold of the night. I sat down on the step and held Blakey close, his little body was really cold to the touch. I checked Donald for a pulse but there was none, and he was stone cold.

I phoned the emergency services and informed them of his death, and they said the police and ambulance were on their way.

“Oh Donald, my dear friend, I´m so sorry to see you like this,” I said to him. Blakey kept looking from me to Donald and back again. “There´s nothing I can do, boy, he´s gone now.” Tears were flowing down my face and I just sat there sobbing uncontrollably. Blakey huddled closer to me sensing the pain I was in, and I could see in his eyes that he too was suffering. We both of us have lost a very dear friend and a wonderful man in ‘Donald James Kilbaine’. I think it´s going to affect all the people that knew him. When the Police and ambulance arrived, Donald was taken away to the hospital morgue. I gave my details to the Police and told them that I would be taking care of his funeral. What was it Donald said, “It just rips yer soul from yer body, it does,” and he was right, it certainly is ripping at mine.

I gave it a few more minutes before I called Jane, and when she answered I couldn´t speak and broke down crying, “He´s gone,” I finally managed to tell her, “he passed away in the night.”

I told her that I would be bringing Blakey home to stay with us, and that Donald had been taken to the hospital morgue. I could hear that Jane was crying too, and I told her I´d be home shortly.

I contacted the shelter and informed Graham of Donald´s death. He gave me his sincere condolences and said he was sorry for our loss. “Is there anything I can do?” he asked, and I told him I couldn´t think

straight right now and would call back if I needed any help.

I had collected all of Donald´s belongings and put them in the car and sat Blakey in the back. The poor little dog was restless and couldn´t understand where Donald was.

When I got home, Jane was still in tears and she said how painful it is. I said we shall have to tell the kids and they will be devastated.

"We´ll face that when they get home," she said.

I will have to arrange the funeral and get the death certificate sorted out. I´ll have to speak to the vicar as well.

"We´ll get it all done, don´t worry," she said.

Let´s get Blakey sorted with a bed and food. I´ve got all of Donald´s things in the car, I´ll go and bring them in."

Jane was sat on the settee when I came back in. Blakey was sat by her side with his chin on her lap and Jane was stroking his head.

"Poor thing, he finds a new owner and then this happens," I said. His head didn´t move when I spoke but his sad eyes just looked up at me. I sat on the settee and also stroked his head. He gave out a little whine and put his paw on my arm. "I think we are all in for a very sad few days," I said to Jane.

"I don´t think you´re wrong," she replied.

Samantha and James were devastated when we told them, and they cried, as did we, for most of the evening.

-: T :-

Chapter Twenty-Five

‘Goodbye Old Friend’

It had been a traumatic week since Donald’s passing, and although it´s hard to accept and get over this sort of loss we did manage, between the tears, to obtain the death certificates, register his death, and arrange for his funeral and burial at St. Thomas´s Church. The funeral was to take place in three weeks’ time. I had his body moved from the city morgue to the Chapel of Rest on St. James Street.

I did not like the thought of him being buried in his old clothes, so I bought him a suit, shirt, tie, and shoes. The staff at the chapel laid him out perfectly. He looked peaceful, and ready to be reunited with his wife Tina, and his children Jane and Donald James.

I had located his family´s graves at St. Thomas´s church cemetery and, maybe because of Tina´s parents, Tina´s grave was, in fact prepared, as ‘Double Depth’ and Donald can be buried with his wife and children.

“After all these years they will all be together again,” Jane said.

The thought of that certainly helped with the grief we were all feeling.

Thankfully, Blakey has settled in at home and we all love him. He has his own bed and obviously a lot of

squeaky toys the children have bought for him. I believe that if he had to choose, he would certainly be James´s dog. They go everywhere together and seem to have formed a true bond of friendship.

I remember not being able to sleep one night and got up to make myself a cup of tea. I looked in on the kids and they were both sound asleep, and so was Blakey on James´s bed. I smiled to myself, knowing that he used to spend his nights snuggled up to Donald, and the thought of Blakey waiting for us all to go to bed before he crept upstairs to sleep with James nearly made me laugh.

Jane laundered all of Donald´s clothes and we had his sleeping bag and greatcoat dry cleaned. We gave them all to Graham at the shelter so that they could be redistributed to people that may need them.

Graham called me one evening to say that he had had a call from Glynis Bishop, she used to be the nurse at the shelter, and she had heard of Donald´s death. She and Donald were good friends, and she would like to attend his funeral.

“By all means, she is more than welcome,” I told him.

“I have given her all the details and timings. She said to pass on her condolences to you and your family, she knew how you all cared for and helped him," he said.

"Thanks Graham, and if anyone else would like to attend please, pass on the details to them," I told him.

"I certainly will," he said.

I arrived home at six o'clock, showered and changed, ready for Martin Duffy, the vicar, to arrive. He wanted to go through the service and hymn choices. We spoke at great length about Donald´s character, and he sat making notes for his eulogy.

"As far as hymns go, Donald would have preferred to have songs that he liked being played," I told Martin, which he prefers to be called, "and I know that he liked the Beatles, so they can carry him in to 'All You Need is Love' and 'The Long and Winding Road' when they take him out for the internment."

"Great choices," he said. "Can you think of anything else you would like in the service?"

"Yes, I would like to read Mary Elizabeth Frye´s poem 'Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep, if that is okay."

"Yes, that´ll be fine," he said.

He thanked me for my time and again said how sorry he was for our loss. I thanked him for coming and said I would call if I thought of anything else.

The following Sunday, we all went down to the park. It was a cold day but dry and bright. Blakey loved it because he got to play fetch with Samantha and James. We sat on the bench watching the swans

and ducks before we fed them. “Donald loved it here,” I said to Jane.

“I think we should get a memorial bench with a dedication plate on it to Donald,” Jane suggested.

“That is a fantastic idea,” I said, “I´ll look into it. What gave you the idea anyway?” I asked.

“I notice there´s one with a plate on near the trees over there, and it would be a nice way to honour him,” she said.

We spent some time feeding the swans and ducks, but we kept Blakey on his lead for fear he´d be in there after them. After a few hours, we made our way to Brian´s burger van for hot dogs and a sausage for Blakey. Brian had not heard the news about Donald and said that he was saddened by it. He said he would like to go to the funeral as he thought that Donald was one of life´s true gentlemen. I gave him the details and time and thanked him for his kind words.

As we walked back up through the town, Blakey was leading the way and slightly pulling on his lead. It was obviously a route he travelled many times with Donald. At the top of the town, Blakey turned to cross over towards the square and sat at the kerb. We made sure the road was clear and all crossed over and went into the square. Blakey led us over to the bench where he and Donald must have rested. We all sat for a while taking in the scene, as Donald would do before making his way to his doorway. It, for me, seemed like a route

of remembrance and Blakey must have been reliving those moments too. He was looking at us and then at the pigeons as if saying that they too need to be fed, but, sadly, all the bread went to the swans and ducks.

"We´ll bring you some next time we come," said Jane.

Samantha and James will be spending the day of the funeral with Jane´s sister Alison. We didn´t feel it right for them to attend a funeral, being so young. She is going to collect them the day before and take them back to her place, that way they won´t see the hearse arrive at the house.

The evening before the funeral, I went to the Chapel of Rest to say my last goodbyes to Donald. The room was white, his coffin was in the centre and on the wall behind him was a single cross. In the left-hand corner stood the coffin lid and the brass plate simply said 'Donald James Kilbaine'. In the right-hand corner there was a single church candle on a tall stand burning. The flickering flame gave a peaceful glow to Donald's face. His face showed no signs of stress or worry, and it just looked as though he was sleeping.

"I´ve come to say goodbye my friend," I told him. I put a miniature bottle of 'keep out the cold' rum in his jacket pocket and told him it was his central heating for his journey. I then placed a pound coin in his right hand as a tear trickled down my face. "This is all you ever asked for, Donald, and then you told me to forget

it, because the chat we had meant more to you than the money. If there is a heaven up there, I hope you can meet up with your family, my friend.

Oh, and another thing Donald, you were absolutely right, you never know what you´ve got till it´s gone." Before I left I said, "Goodbye old friend," and in my mind I heard him saying, "And goodbye to you, young Jim, and goodbye to you."

Jane and I were ready and waiting for the hearse to arrive and we had invited Graham and his wife Kate to join us in the limousine for the journey to the church. The hearse and the limousine arrived on time, the flowers spelling Donald were yellow and white, the black coated chauffeurs stood by their cars ready to open doors, and I remembered what Donald said about 'Images' being imprinted in the mind.

It was a cold, dry, and sunny day. The church was cold, and the only warmth was in the colour of the flowers that decorated the aisle. As we walked to our seats there were familiar faces. Daniel Johnson, Brian from the burger van, Nurse Judy, Nurse Glynis Bishop, David Stevens 'The young army lad' and two ladies in Salvation Army uniforms. As we made our way down the aisle, sombre nods of acknowledgement were exchanged by all.

We took our seats and, all of a sudden, the fanfare of the 'Marseillaise' which is the opening bars to the Beatles song 'All You Need is Love' started to play.

I turned around to see the coffin being carried in and the words, Love, Love, Love, filled the church.

His coffin was placed in front of us. Photographs of Donald with Blakey ‘Taken at the park by Samantha’ were stood alongside him for all to see. In both of the photos Donald had a big smile and that Kilbaine twinkle in his eyes.

As for the images Donald spoke of, yes, the ribbon hanging from the spine of the vicar’s bible was black, and there were prayers, and hurting faces.

Martin Duffy ,the vicar, gave me the nod. I walked to the front and stood alongside Donald’s coffin. After a short pause to compose myself, I read Mary Elizabeth Frye´s poem, ‘Do not stand at my grave and weep’.

“Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the mornings hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am not there. I did not die”

‘The Long and Winding Road’ played as we followed the coffin to the graveside. The Black and White robes the vicar wore, the Green Grass and the Brass Plate bearing Donald’s name. The ladies White Hankies were bright against their black clothing as they wiped away their tears and the words God, Heaven and Peace were used in their abundance. The images of a very sad day that will stay with us all forever.

After the service we all made our way to the ‘Travellers Rest’ Hotel for the wake. We had arranged for a luncheon buffet and drinks to celebrate the part that Donald had played in our lives in the very short time that we knew him.

After the luncheon we all went our separate ways and took memories of Donald with us.

It has now been two months since Donald´s passing. We spend our Sundays at the park. Blakey plays fetch with James and Samantha. Jane and I watch on from Donald´s memorial bench and there´s not a day goes by without something reminding us all about Donald.

‘We´ve come a fair few miles,’ as Donald said when I first met him in Blake Street, and I feel that we are all a little bit wiser for having met him.

-: T :-

The End

“Matters not if tramp or king, if you´re mute or if you sing, pauper, waif, slave or less, worrier, wealthy, royal blessed. Matters not you are in life, matters not to cloak and scythe”

“Tom Balch”

About the Author

Tom Balch

The author, Tom Balch was born in Portsmouth.
He served a full career of twenty-five years in the British Army. He has been writing poetry and verse for many years on many different subjects, and this book ‘A Doorway in Blake Street’ is his first novel. He is now retired and living in a small village in Andalucia where he continues to write. He is presently working on his next novel, ‘Ted and Trev and Tracy´s Bits’ a comedy that will have your sides splitting with laughter…

Also by Tom Balch

A Million Miles

In this beautifully presented book you will find poetry and verse covering many different subjects, The author covers all of the emotions that life throws at us. Humour, Happiness, Sadness, War, Serious, Flippant, Death, Loss, Nostalgia, the list goes on and on. So pour yourself a glass of wine, a glass of beer or a nice cup of tea ‘Best not all three’. Find a nice tranquil spot, relax, sip, read, and enjoy.

The Story Man

This beautifully presented book follows the life of The Story Man, and his friends. It is told in verse and takes place in the beautiful harbour village in which they live.

“Day after day he sits alone
down by the harbour wall,
repairing nets and splicing ropes
from springtime through to fall.
His sun-baked face and haunted stare
tell of an arduous life at sea,
but to the locals he´s their story man
telling all his tales for free”.

Acknowledgements

Mike Bryant and Susan Jarvis Bryant ‘Friends across the pond’ for their hard work formatting and proofing this book.